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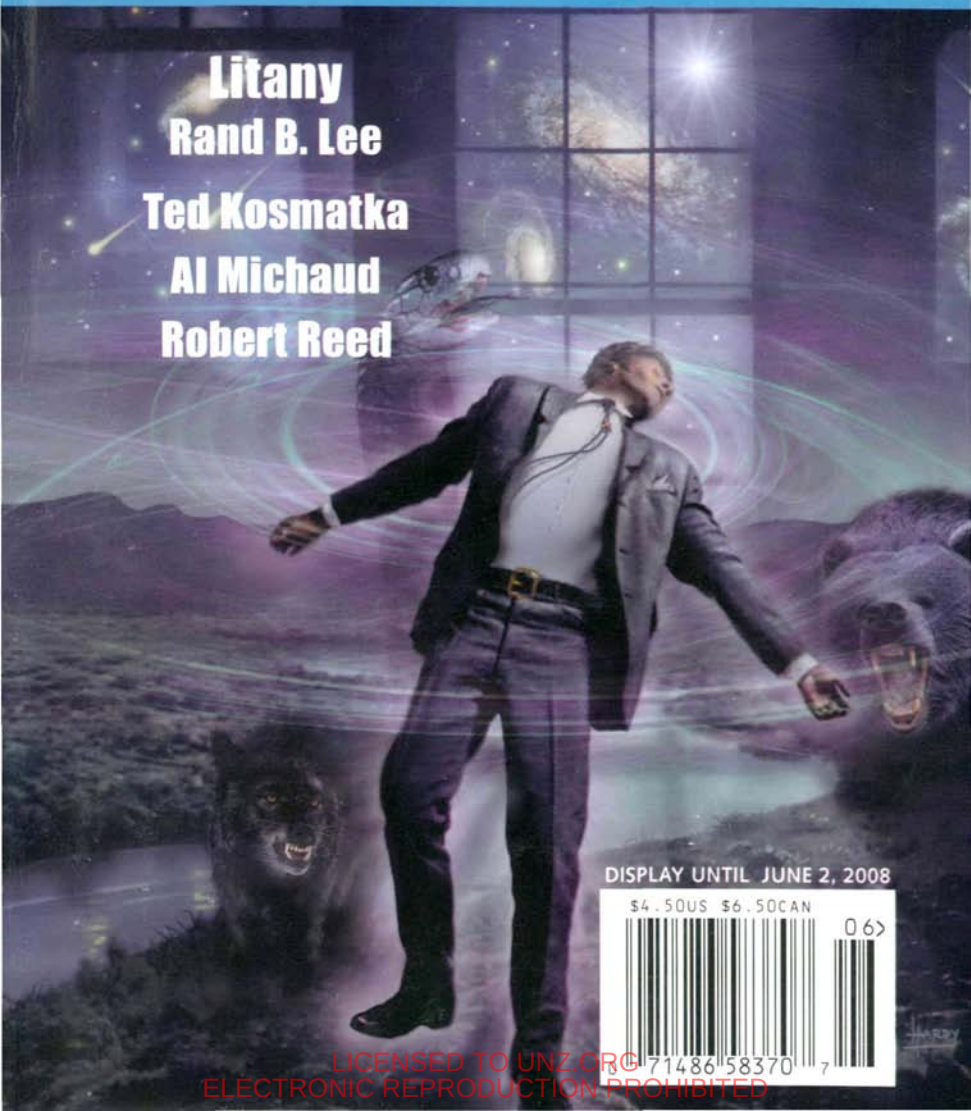

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*Since 2005, Ted Kosmatka has sold stories to numerous literary and science fiction magazines. His story "The Prophet of Flores" will appear in two different best-of-the-year anthologies this year and his fiction has been translated into Hebrew and Russian. You can find a complete bibliography of his works at* tedkosmatka.com, *but if you're looking for pictures of his adorable baby daughter Morgan, you'll have to look elsewhere.*

*If you're looking for adorable kiddies in your fiction right now, Mr. Kosmatka's* F&SF *debut is not for you. (There's one elsewhere in this issue.) This story's a hardboiled science fiction thriller, and a good one at that.*

# The Art of Alchemy

## *By Ted Kosmatka*

SOMETIMES WHEN I CAME over, Veronica would already be naked. I'd find her spread out on a lawn chair behind the fence of her townhome, several sinewy yards of black skin visible to second-story windows across the park. She'd scissor her long legs and raise a languid eyelid.

"You have too many clothes on," she'd say.

And I'd sit. Run a hand along smooth, dark curves. Curl pale fingers into hers.

The story of Veronica is the story of this place. These steel mills, and the dying little city-states around them, have become a part of it somehow — Northwest Indiana like some bizarre, composite landscape we've all consented to believe in. A place of impossible contrasts. Cornfields and slums and rich, gated communities. National parkland and industrial sprawl.

Let it stand for the rest of the country. Let it stand for everything.

On cold days, the blast furnaces assemble huge masses of white smoke across the Lake Michigan shoreline. You can still see it mornings,

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driving I-90 on the way to work — a broad cumulous mountain range rising from the northern horizon, as if we were an alpine community, nestled beneath shifting peaks. It is a terrible kind of beauty.

Veronica was twenty-five when we met — just a few years younger than I. She was brilliant, and beautiful, and broken. Her townhome sat behind gates on the expensive side of Ridge Road and cost more than I made in five years. Her neighbors were doctors, and lawyers, and business owners. From the courtyard where she lay naked, you could see a church steeple, the beautiful, dull green of oxidized copper, rising over distant rooftops.

The story of Veronica is also the story of edges. And that's what I think about most when I think of her now. The exact line where one thing becomes another. The exact point where an edge becomes sharp enough to cut you.

We might have been talking about her work. Or maybe she was just making conversation, trying to cover her nervousness; I don't remember. But I remember the rain and the hum of her BMW's engine. And I remember her saying, as she took the Randolph Street exit, "His name is Voicheck."

"Is that his first name, or last?"

"It's the only one he gave me."

We took Randolph down to the Loop, and the Chicago skyline reared up at us. Veronica knew the uptown streets. The restaurant on Dearborn had been her choice of location — a nice sixty-dollar-a-plate Kazuto bar that stayed open till two A.M. Trendy, clubby, dark. Big name suppliers sometimes brought her there for business dinners, if they were also trying to sleep with her. It was the kind of place wealthy people went when they wanted to get drunk with other wealthy people.

"He claims he's from Poland," she said. "But the accent isn't quite right. More Baltic than Slavic."

I wondered at that. At how she knew the difference.

"Where's he based out of?" I asked.

"Ukraine, formerly, but he sure as hell can't go back now. Had a long list of former this, former that. Different think tanks and research labs. Lots of burned bridges."

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"Is he the guy, or just the contact?"

"He's playing it like he's the guy, but I don't know."

She hit her signal and made a left. The rain came down harder, Chicago slick-bright with streetlights and traffic. Green lions on the right, and at some point, we crossed the river.

"Is he bringing it with him?" I asked.

"I don't know."

"But he said he was actually bringing it?"

"Yeah." She looked at me. "He said."

"Jesus."

Her face wore a strange expression in the red glow of dashboard light. It took me a moment to place it. Then it hit me: in the year and a half I'd known her, this was the first time I'd ever seen her scared.

I met her at the lab. I say "lab" and people imagine white walls and sterile test tubes, but it's not like that. It's mostly math I do, and something close to metallurgy. All of it behind glass security walls. I check my work with a scanning electron microscope, noting crystalline lattices and surface structure micro-abrasions.

She walked through the door behind Hal, the lab's senior supervisor.

"This is the memory metals lab," Hal told her, gesturing as he entered.

She nodded. She was young and slender, smooth dark skin, a face that seemed, at first glance, to be more mouth than it should. That was my initial impression of her — some pretty new-hire the bosses were showing around. That's it. And then she was past me, following the supervisor deeper into the lab. At the time, I had no idea.

I heard the supervisor's voice drone on as he showed her the temper ovens and the gas chromatograph in the next room. When they returned, the super was following her.

I looked up from the lab bench and she was staring at me. "So you're the genius," she said.

That was when she pointed it at me. The look. The way she could look at you with those big dark eyes, and you could almost see the gears moving — her full mouth pulled into a sensuous smile that wanted to be more than it was. She smiled like she knew something you didn't.

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There were a dozen things I could have said, but the nuclear wind behind those eyes blasted my words away until all that was left was a sad kind of truth. I knew what she meant. "Yeah," I said. "I guess that's me."

She turned to the supervisor. "Thank you for your time."

Hal nodded and left. It took me a moment to realize what had just happened. The laboratory supervisor — my direct boss — had been dismissed.

"Tell me," she said. "What do you do here?"

I paused for three seconds before I spoke, letting myself process the seismic shift. Then I explained it.

She smiled while I talked. I'd done it for an audience a dozen times, these little performances. It was practically a part of my job description since the last corporate merger made Uspar-Nagoi the largest steel company in the world. I'd worked for three different corporations in the last two years and hadn't changed offices once. The mill guys called them white-hats, these management teams that flew in to tour the facilities, shaking hands, smiling under their spotless white hardhats, attempting to fit their immediate surroundings into the flowchart of the company's latest international acquisitions. Research was a prime target for the tours, but here in the lab, they were harder to spot since so many suits came walking through. It was hard to know who you were talking to, really. But two things were certain. The management types were usually older than the girl standing in front of me. And they'd always, up till now, been male.

But I explained it like I always did. Or maybe I put a little extra spin on it; maybe I showed off. I don't know. "Nickle-titanium alloys," I said. I opened the desiccator and pulled out a small strip of steel. It was long and narrow, cut into almost the exact dimensions of a ruler.

"First you take the steel," I told her, holding out the dull strip of metal. "And you heat it." I lit the Bunsen burner and held the steel over the open flame. Nothing happened for ten, twenty seconds. She watched me. I imagined what I must look like to her at that moment — blue eyes fixed on the warming steel, short hair jutting at wild angles around the safety goggles I wore on my forehead. Just another technofetishist lost in his obsession. It was a type. Flame licked the edges of the dull metal.

I smiled and, all at once, the metal moved.

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The metal contracted muscularly, like a living thing, twisting itself into a ribbon, a curl, a spring.

"It's caused by micro- and nano-scale surface restructuring," I told her. "The change in shape results from phase transformations. Martensite when cool; Austenite when heated. The steel remembers its earlier configurations. The different phases want to be in different shapes."

"Memory metal," she said. "I've always wanted to see this. What applications does it have?"

The steel continued to flex, winding itself tighter. "Medical, structural, automotive. You name it."

"Medical?"

"For broken bones. The shape memory alloy has a transfer temp close to body temp. You attach a plate to the break site, and body heat makes the alloy want to contract, thereby exerting compressive force on the bone at both ends of the fracture."

"Interesting."

"They're also investigating the alloy's use in heart stents. A cool-crushed alloy tube can be inserted into narrow arteries where it'll expand and open once it's heated to blood temperature."

"You mentioned automotive."

I nodded. Automotive. The big money. "Imagine that you've put a small dent in your fender," I said. "Instead of taking it to the shop, you pull out your hairdryer. The steel pops right back in shape."

She stayed at the lab for another hour, asking intelligent questions, watching the steel cool and straighten itself. Before she left, she shook my hand politely and thanked me for my time. She never once told me her name. I watched the door close behind her as she left.

Two weeks later she returned. This time, without Hal.

She drifted into the lab like a ghost near the end of my shift.

In the two weeks since I'd seen her, I'd learned a little about her. I'd learned her name, and that her corporate hat wasn't just management, but upper management. She had an engineering degree from out east, then Ivy League grad school by age twenty. She gave reports to men who ran a corporate economy larger than most countries. She was somebody's golden child, fast-tracked to the upper circles. The company based her out of the East Chicago regional headquarters but occasionally flew her to

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Korea, India, South Africa, to the latest corporate takeovers and the constant stream of new facilities that needed integration. She was an organizational savant, a voice in the ear of the global acquisition market. The multinationals had long since stopped pretending they were about actually making things; it was so much more Darwinian than that now. The big fish ate the little fish, and Uspar-Nagoi, by anyone's standards, was a whale. You grow fast enough, long enough and pretty soon you need an army of gifted people to understand what you own, and how it all fits together. She was part of that army.

"So what else have you been working on?" she asked.

When I heard her voice, I turned. Veronica: her smooth, pretty face utterly emotionless, the smile gone from her full mouth.

"Okay," I said. And this time I showed her my real tricks. I showed her what I could really do. Because she'd asked.

Martensite like art. A gentle flame — a slow, smooth origami unfolding.

We watched it together. Metal and fire, a thing I'd never shown anyone before.

"This is beautiful," she said.

I showed her the butterfly, my little golem — its only movement a slow flexing of its delicate steel wings as it passed through phase changes.

"You made this?"

I nodded. "There are no mechanical parts," I told her. "Just a single solid sheet of steel."

"It's like magic," she said. She touched it with a delicate index finger.

"Just science," I said. "Sufficiently advanced."

We watched the butterfly cool, wings flapping slowly. Finally, it began folding in on itself, cocooning, the true miracle. "The breakthrough was micro-degree shifting," I said. "It gives you more design control."

"Why this design?"

I shrugged. "You heat it slow, an ambient rise, and it turns into a butterfly."

"What happens if you heat it fast?"

I looked at her. "It turns into a dragon."

That night at her townhome, she took her clothes off slow — her

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mouth prehensile and searching. Although I was half a head taller, I found her legs were as long as mine. Strong, lean runner's legs, calf muscles bunched like fists. Afterward we lay on her dark sheets, a distant streetlight filtering through the blinds, drawing a pattern on the wall.

"Are you going to stay the night?" she asked.

I thought of my house, the empty rooms and the silence. "Do you want me to?"

She paused. "Yeah, I want you to."

"Then I'll stay."

The ceiling fan above her bed hummed softly, circulating the air, cooling the sweat on my bare skin.

"I've been doing research on you for the last week," she said. "On what you do."

"Checking up on me?"

She ignored the question and draped a slick arm across my shoulder. "Nagoi has labs in Asia running parallel to yours. Did you know that?"

"No."

"From years before the Uspar merger. Smart alloys with chemical triggers instead of heat; and stranger things, too. A special copper-aluminum-nickel alloy that's supposed to be triggered by remote frequency. Hit a button on a transmitter, and you get phase change by some kind of resonance. I didn't understand most of it. More of your magic steel."

"Not magic," I said.

"Modern chemistry grew out of the art of alchemy. At what point does it start being alchemy again?"

"It's always been alchemy, at the heart of it. We're just getting better at it now."

"I should tell you," she said, curling her fingers into my hair. "I don't believe in interracial relationships." That was the first time she said it—a thing she'd repeat often during the next year and a half, usually when we were in bed.

"You don't believe in them?"

"No," she said.

In the darkness she was a silhouette, a complication of shadows against the window light. She wasn't looking at me, but at the ceiling. I

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studied her profile — the rounded forehead, the curve of her jaw, the placement of her mouth — positioned not just between her nose and chin, but also forward of them, as if something in the architecture of her face were straining outward. She wore a steel-gray necklace, Uspar-Nagoi logo glinting between the dark curve of her breasts. I traced her bottom lip with my finger.

"You're wrong," I said.

"How's that?'

"I've seen them. They exist."

I closed my eyes and slept.

THE RAIN WAS still coming down, building puddles across the Chicago streets. We pulled onto Dearborn and parked the car in a twenty-dollar lot. Veronica squeezed my hand as we walked toward the restaurant.

Voicheck was standing near the door; you couldn't miss him. Younger than I expected — pale and broad-faced, with a shaved head, dark glasses. He stood outside the restaurant, bare arms folded in front of his chest. He looked more like a bouncer than any kind of scientist.

"You must be Voicheck," Veronica said, extending her hand.

He hesitated for a moment. "I didn't expect you to be black."

She accepted this with only a slight narrowing of her eyes. "Certain people never do. This is my associate, John."

I nodded and shook his hand, thinking, *typical Eastern European lack of tact*. It wasn't racism. It was just that people didn't come to this country knowing what *not* to say; they didn't understand the context. On the floor of the East Chicago steel plant, I'd once had a Russian researcher ask me, loudly, how I could tell the Mexican workers from the Puerto Ricans. He was honestly curious. "You don't," I told him. "Ever."

A hostess walked us down dark carpet, past rows of potted bamboo, and seated us at a table near the back. The waitress brought us our drinks. Voicheck took his glasses off and rubbed the bridge of his nose. The lenses were prescription, I noticed. Over the last decade, surgery had become so cheap and easy in the States that only anachronists and foreigners wore glasses anymore. Voicheck took a long swig of his Goose Island and got right to the point. "We need to discuss price."

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Veronica shook her head. "First, we need to know how it is made."

"That information is what you'll be paying for." His accent was thick, but he spoke slowly enough to be understood. He opened his hand and showed us a small, gray flash drive, the kind you'd pay thirty dollars for at Best Buy. His fingers curled back into a fist. "This is data you'll understand."

"And you?" Veronica asked.

He smiled. "I understand enough to know what it is worth."

"Where is it from?"

"Donets'k, originally. After that, Chisinau laboratory, until about two years ago. Now the work is owned by a publicly traded company which shall, for the time being, remain nameless. The work is top secret. Only a few people at the company even know about the breakthrough. I have all the files saved. Now we discuss price."

Veronica was silent. She knew better than to make the first offer.

Voicheck let the silence draw out. "One hundred thirteen thousand," he said.

"That's a pretty exact number," Veronica said.

"Because that's exactly twice what I'll entertain as a first counter offer."

Veronica blinked. "So you'll take half that?"

"You offer fifty-six thousand five hundred? My answer is no, I am sorry. But here is where I rub my chin; and because I'm feeling generous, I tell you we can split the difference. We are negotiating, no? Then one of us does the math, and it comes out to eighty-five thousand. Is that number round enough for you?"

"I liked the fifty-six thousand better."

"Eighty-five minimum."

"That is too much."

"What, I should let you steal from me? You talked me down from one hundred thirteen already. I can go no further."

"There's no way we — "

Voicheck held up his hand. "Eighty-five in three days."

"I don't know if we can get it in three days."

"If no, then I disappear. It is simple."

Veronica glanced at me.

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I spoke for the first time. "How do we even know what we'd be paying for? You expect us to pay eighty-five grand for what's on some flash drive?

Voicheck looked at me and frowned. "No, of course not." He opened his other fist. "For this, too." He dropped something on the table. Something that looked like a small red wire.

"People have died for this." He gestured toward the red wire. "You may pick it up."

I looked closely. It wasn't one wire; it was two. Two rubber-coated wires, like what you'd find behind a residential light switch. He noticed our confusion.

"The coating is for protection and to make it visible," he said.

"Why does it need protection?"

"Not it. You. The coating protects you."

Veronica stood and looked at me. "Let's go. He's been wasting our time."

"No, wait," he said. "Look." He picked up one of the wires. He lifted it delicately by one end — and the other wire lifted, too, rising from the table's surface like some magician's trick.

I saw then that I'd been wrong; it was not two wires after all, but one.

"The coating was stripped from ten centimeters in the middle," Voicheck said. "So you could see what was underneath."

But in the dim light, there was nothing to see. I bent close. Nothing at all. In the spot where the coating had been removed, the thread inside was so fine that it was invisible.

"What is it?" I asked.

"An allotrope of carbon, Fullerene structural family. You take it," he said. "Do tests to confirm. But remember, is just a neat toy without this." He held out the flash drive. "This explains how the carbon nanotubes are manufactured. How they can be woven into sheets, what lab is developing the technique, and more."

I stared at him. "The longest carbon nanotubes anybody has been able to make are just over a centimeter."

"Until now," he said. "Now they can be miles. In three days you come back. You give me the eighty-five thousand, I give you the data and information about where the graphene rope is being developed."

Veronica picked up the wire. "All right," she said. "Three days."

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* * *

My father was a steelworker, as was his father before him.

My great-grandfather, though, had been here before the mills. He'd been a builder. He was here when the Lake Michigan shoreline was unbroken sand from Illinois to St. Joseph. He built Bailey Cemetery around the turn of the century — a great stone mausoleum in which some of the area's earliest settlers were buried. Tourists visit the place now. It's on some list of historic places, and once a summer, I take my sister's daughters to see it, careful to pick up the brochure.

There is a street in Porter named after him, my great-grandfather. Not because he was important, but because he was the only person who lived there. It was the road to his house, so they gave it his name. Now bi-levels crowd the street. He was here before the cities, before the kingdoms of rust and fire. Before the mills came and ate the beaches.

I try to imagine what this part of Indiana would have been like then. Woods, and wetlands, and rolling dunes. It must have been beautiful.

Sometimes I walk out to the pier at night and watch the ore boats swing through the darkness. From the water, the mill looks like any city. Any huge, sprawling city. You can see the glow of a thousand lights; you hear the trains and the rumble of heavy machines. Then the blast furnace taps a heat, a false-dawn glow of red and orange — flames making dragon's fire on the rolling Lake Michigan waves. Lighting up the darkness like hell itself.

The drive back to Indiana was quiet. The rain had stopped. We drove with the windows half-open, letting the wind flutter in, both of us lost in thought.

The strand — that's what we'd call it later — was tucked safely into her purse.

"Do you think it's for real?" she asked.

"We'll know tomorrow."

"You can do the testing at your lab?"

"Yeah," I said.

"Do you think he is who he says he is?"

"No, he's not even trying."

"He called it a graphene rope, which isn't quite right."

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"So?" I said.

"Clusters of the tubes *do* naturally align into ropes held together by Van der Waals forces. It's the kind of slip only somebody familiar with the theory would make."

"So he's more familiar with it than he lets on?"

"Maybe, but there's no way to know," she said.

The next day I waited until the other researchers had gone home, and then I took the strand out of my briefcase and laid it on the lab bench. I locked the door to the materials testing lab and energized the tensile machine. The fluorescent lights flickered. It was a small thing, the strand.. It seemed insignificant as it rested there on the bench. A scrap of insulated wiring from an electrician's tool box. Yet it was a pivot point around which the world would change, if it was what it was supposed to be. If it was what it was supposed to be, the world had changed already. We were just finding out about it.

The testing took most of the night. When I finished, I walked back to my office and opened a bottle I kept in the bottom drawer of a filing cabinet. I sat and sipped.

It's warm in my office. My office is a small cubby in the back room of the lab, a thrown-together thing made by wall dividers and shelves. It's an office because my desk and computer sit there. Otherwise it might be confused with a closet or small storage room. File cabinets line one side. There are no windows. To my left, a hundred sticky notes feather the wall. The other wall is metal, white, magnetic. A dozen refrigerator magnets hold calendars, pictures, papers. There is a copy of the lab's phone directory, a copy of the lab's quality policy, and a sheet of paper on which the geometry of crystal systems is described. The R&D directory of services is there, too, held to the wall by a metal clip. All the phone numbers I might need. A picture of my sister, blonde, unsmiling, caught in the act of speaking to me over a paper plate of fried chicken, the photo taken at a summer party three years ago. There is an Oxford Instruments periodic table. There's also a picture of a sailboat. Blue waves. And a picture of the Uspar-Nagoi global headquarters, based out of London.

Veronica finally showed up a few minutes past midnight. I was watching the butterfly as she walked through the door.

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"Well?" she asked.

"I couldn't break it."

"What do you mean?"

"I couldn't get a tensile strength because I couldn't get it to fail. Without failure, there's no result."

"What about the other tests?"

"It took more than 32,000 pounds per square inch without shearing. It endured 800 degrees Fahrenheit without a measurable loss of strength or conductivity. Transmission electron microscopy allowed for direct visualization. I took these pictures." I handed her the stack of printed sheets. She went through them one by one.

Veronica blinked. She sat. "What does this mean?"

"It means that I think they've done it," I said. "Under impossibly high pressures, nanotubes can link, or so the theory holds. Carbon bonding is described by quantum chemistry orbital hybridization, and they've traded some sp2 bonds for the sp3 bonds of diamond."

She looked almost sad. She kissed me. The kiss was sad. "What are its uses?"

"Everything. Literally, almost everything. A great many things steel can do, these carbon nanotubes will do better. It's super-light and super-strong, perfect for aircraft. This material moves the fabled space elevator into the realm of possibility."

"There'd still be a lot of R&D necessary — "

"Yes, of course, it will be years down the road, but eventually the sky's the limit. There's no telling what this material will do, if it's manufactured right. It could be used for everything from suspension bridges to spacecraft. It could help take us to the stars. We're at the edge of a revolution."

I looked down at the strand. After a long time, I finally said what had been bothering me for the last sixteen hours. "But why did Voicheck come to you?" I said. "Of all places, why bring this to a steel company?"

She looked at me. "If you invent an engine that runs on water, why offer it to an oil company?" She picked up the strand. "Only one reason to do that, John. Because the oil company is certain to buy it."

She looked at the red wire in her hand. "If only to shut it down."

* * *

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That night we drank. I stood at the window on the second story of her townhome and looked out at her quiet neighborhood, watching the expensive cars roll by on Ridge Road. The Ridge Road that neatly bisects Lake County. Land on the south, higher; the land to the north, low, easing toward urban sprawl, and the marshes, and Lake Michigan. That long, low ridge of land represented the glacial maxim — the exact line where the glacier stopped during the last ice-age, pushing all that dirt and stone in front of it like a plow, before it melted and receded and became the Great Lakes — and thousands of years later, road builders would stand on that ridge and think to themselves how easy it would be to follow the natural curve of the land; and so they built what they came to build and called it the only name that would fit: Ridge Road. The exact line, in the region, where one thing became another.

I wrapped the naked strand around my finger and drew it tight, watching the bright red blood well up from where it contacted my skin — because in addition to being strong and thin, the strand had the property of being *sharp*. For the tests, I'd stripped away most of the rubber coating, leaving only a few inches of insulation at the ends. The rest was exposed strand. Invisible.

"You cut yourself," Veronica said. She parted her soft lips and drew my finger into her mouth.

The first time I'd told her I loved her, it was an accident. In bed, half asleep, I'd said it. Good night, I love you. A thing that was out of my mouth before I even realized it — a habit from an old relationship come rising up out of me, the way every old relationship lives just under the skin of every new one. All the promises. All the possibilities. Right there under the skin. I'd felt her stiffen beside me, and an hour later, she nudged me awake. She was sitting up, arms folded across her breasts, as defensive as I'd ever seen her. I realized she hadn't slept at all. "I heard what you said." There was anger in her voice, and whole stratus of pain.

But I denied it. "You're hearing things."

Though of course it was true. What I'd said. Even if saying it was an accident. It had been true for a while.

The night after I tested the strand, I lay in bed and watched her breathe. Blankets kicked to the floor.

Light from the window glinted off her necklace, a thin herringbone

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pattern — some shiny new steel, Uspar-Nagoi emblem across her beautiful dark skin. I caressed the herringbone plate with my finger, such an odd interlinking of metal.

"They gave this to you?"

She fingered the necklace. "They gave one to all of us," she said. "Management perk. Supposed to be worth a mint."

"The logo ruins it," I said. "Like a tag."

"Everything is tagged, one way or another," she said. "I met him once."

"Who?"

"The name on the necklace."

"Nagoi? You met him?"

"At a facility in Frankfurt. He came through with his group. Shook my hand. He was taller than I thought, but his handshake was this flaccid, aqueous thing, straight-fingered, like a flipper. It was obvious he loathed the Western tradition. I was prepared to like him, prepared to be impressed, or to find him merely ordinary."

She was silent for so long I thought she might have fallen asleep. When she finally spoke, her voice had changed. "I've never been one of those people who judged a person by their handshake," she said. "But still...I can't remember a handshake that gave me the creeps like that. They paid sixty-six billion for the Uspar acquisition. Can you imagine that much money? That many employees? That much power? When his daughter went through her divorce, the company stock dropped by two percent. His daughter's divorce did that. Can you believe that? Do you know how much two percent is?"

"A lot."

"They have billions invested in infrastructure alone. More in hard assets and research facilities, not to mention the mills themselves. Those assets are quantifiable and linked to actuarial tables that translate into real dollars. Real dollars which can be used to leverage more takeovers, and the monster keeps growing. If Nagoi's daughter's divorce dipped the share price by two percent, what do you think would happen if a new carbon-product competitor came to market?"

I ran a finger along her necklace. "You think they'll try to stop it?"

"Nagoi's money is in steel. If a legitimate alternative reached market,

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then each mill he owned, each asset all across the world, would suddenly be worth less. Billions of dollars would blink out of existence."

"So what happens now?"

"We get the data. I write my report. I give my presentation. The board suddenly gets interested in buying a certain company in Europe. If that company won't sell, Uspar-Nagoi buys all the stock and owns them anyway. Then shuts them down."

"Suppression won't work. The Luddites never win in the long run."

She smiled. "The three richest men in the world have as much money as the poorest forty-eight nations," she said. "Combined."

I watched her face.

She continued. "The yearly gross product of the world is something like fifty-four trillion dollars, and yet there are millions of people who are still trying to live on two dollars a day. You trust business to do the right thing?"

"No, but I trust the market. A better product will always find its way to the consumer. Even Uspar-Nagoi can't stop that."

"You only say that because you don't understand how it really works. That might have been true a long time ago. The Uspar-Nagoi board does hostile takeovers for a living, and they're not going to release a technology that will devalue their core assets."

Veronica was silent.

"Why did you get into steel?" I asked. "What brought you here?"

"Money," she said. "Just money."

"Then why haven't you told your bosses about Voicheck?"

"I don't know."

"Are you going to tell them?"

"No, I don't think I am."

There was a long pause.

"What are you going to do?"

"Buy it," she said. "Buy Voicheck's data."

"And then what? After you've bought it."

"After I've bought it, I'm going to post it on the Internet."

The drive to meet Voicheck seemed to take forever. The traffic was stop and go until we reached Halsted, and it took us nearly an hour to reach downtown Chicago.

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We parked in the same twenty-dollar lot and Veronica squeezed my hand again as we walked toward the restaurant.

But this time, Voicheck wasn't standing outside looking like a bouncer. He wasn't looking like anything, because he wasn't there. We waited a few minutes and went inside. We asked for the same table. We didn't speak. We had no reason to speak.

After a few minutes, a man in a suit came and sat. He was a gray man in a gray suit. He wore black leather gloves. He was in his fifties, but he was in his fifties the way certain breeds of athletes enter their fifties — broad, and solid, and blocky-shouldered. He had a lantern jaw and thin, sandy hair receding from a wide forehead. The waitress came and asked if he needed anything to drink.

"Yes, please," the man said. "Bourbon. And oh, for my friends here, a Bailey's for him, and what was it?" He looked at Veronica. "A Coke, right?"

Veronica didn't respond. The man's accent was British.

"A Coke," the man told the waitress. "Thank you."

He smiled and turned toward us. "Did you know that bourbon was the official spirit of the U.S. by act of Congress?"

We were silent.

"That's why I always used to make a point of drinking it when I came to the States. I wanted to enjoy the authentic American experience. I wanted to drink bourbon like Americans drink bourbon. But then I discovered an unsettling secret in my travels." The man took something from the inside pocket of his suit jacket and set it on the table. Glasses. Voicheck's glasses — the frames bent into an unnatural position, both prescription lenses shattered.

The man caressed the twisted frames with his finger. "I discovered that Americans don't really drink bourbon. A great many Americans have never so much as tasted it. So then why is it the official spirit of your country?"

We had no opinion. We were without opinion.

"Would you like to hear what I think?" The man said. He bent close and spoke low across the table. "I've developed a theory. I think it was a lie all along. I think someone in your Congress probably had his hand in the bourbon business all those years ago, and sales were flagging; so they

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came up with the idea to make bourbon the official spirit of the country as a way to line their own pockets. Would you like to hear something else I discovered in my travels? No? Well, I'll tell you anyway. I discovered that I don't care much, one way or the other, if that's how it happened. I discovered that I *like* bourbon. And I feel like I'm drinking the most American drink of them all, because your Congress said so, lie or not. The ability to believe a lie can be an important talent. You're probably wondering who I am."

"No," Veronica said.

"Good, then you're smart enough to realize it doesn't matter. You're smart enough to realize that if I'm here, it means that your friend isn't coming back."

"Where is he?" Veronica asked.

"I can't say, but rest assured that wherever he is, he sends his regrets."

"Are you here for the money?"

"The money? I couldn't care less about your money."

"Where's the flash drive?" Veronica asked.

"You mean this?" The man held the gray flash between leathered finger and thumb, then returned it to the breast pocket of his neat gray suit. "This is the closest you're going to get to it, I'm afraid. Your friend seemed to think it belonged to him. I disabused him of that misconception."

"What do you want?" Veronica asked.

"I want what everyone wants, my dear. But what I'm here for today — what I'm being paid to do — is to tie up some loose ends. You can help me."

Silence. Two beats.

"Where is the strand?" he asked.

"He never gave it to us."

The man's gray eyes looked pained. Like a father with a wayward child. "I'm disappointed," he said. "I thought we were developing some trust here. Do you know what loyalty is?"

"Yes."

"No, I don't think you do. Loyalty to your company. Loyalty to the cause. You have some very important people who looked after you, Veronica. You had some important friends."

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"You're from Uspar-Nagoi?"

"Who did you think?"

"I...."

"You have embarrassed certain people who have invested their trust in you. You have embarrassed some very important people."

"That wasn't my intention."

"In my experience, it never is." He spread his hands. "Yet here we are. What were you planning on doing with the data once you obtained it?"

"I don't know what you're talking about."

The pain returned to the man's eyes. He shook his head sadly. "I'm going to ask you a question in a moment. If you lie to me, I promise you." He leaned forward again. "I promise you that I will make you regret it. Do you believe that?"

Veronica nodded.

"Good. Do you have the strand with you?"

"No."

"Then this is what is going to happen now," he said. "We're going to leave. We're going to drive to where the strand is, and you're going to give it to me."

"If I did have it somewhere, and if I did give it to you, what happens then?"

"Probably you'll have to look for another job, I can't say. That's between you and your company. I'm just here to obtain the strand."

The man stood. He laid a hundred-dollar bill on the table and grabbed Veronica's arm. The way he grabbed her arm, he could have been a prom date — just a gentleman walking his lady out the door. Only I could see his fingers dug deep into her flesh.

I followed them out, walking behind them. When we got near the front door, I picked up one of the trendy bamboo pots and brought it down on the man's head with everything I had.

The crash was shocking. Every head in the restaurant swiveled toward us. I bent and fished the flash drive from his breast pocket. "Run," I told her.

We hit the night air sprinting.

"What the fuck are you doing?" she screamed.

"Voicheck is dead," I told her. "We were next."

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Veronica climbed behind the wheel and sped out of the parking lot just as the gray man stumbled out the front door of the restaurant.

The BMW was fast. Faster than anything I would have suspected. Veronica drove with the pedal to the floor, weaving in and out of traffic. Pools of light ticked past.

"They'll still be coming," she said.

"Yeah."

"What are we going to do?"

"We have to stay ahead of them."

"How do we do that? Where do we go?"

"We get through tonight, and then we worry about the rest."

"We can hop a flight somewhere," she said.

"No, what happens tonight decides everything. That strand is our only insurance. Without the strand, we're dead."

Her hands tightened on the steering wheel.

"Where is it?" I asked.

"At my house."

Veronica kept the accelerator floored. "I'm sorry I got you into this," she said.

"Don't be."

We were almost to her house when Veronica's forehead creased. She took the turn onto Ridge, frowning. She looked confused for a moment, then surprised. Her hand went to her neck. It happened so quickly.

I had time to notice her necklace, gone flat-gray. There was an instant of recognition in her eyes before the alloy phase-changed — an instant of panic, and then the necklace shifted, writhed, herringbone plate tightening like razor wire. She gasped and let go of the wheel, clutching at her throat. I grabbed the wheel with one hand, trying to grab her necklace with the other. But already it was gone, tightened through her skin, blood spilling from her jugulars as she shrieked. Then even her shrieks changed, gurgling, as the blade cut through her voice box.

I screamed and the car spun out of control. The sound of squealing tires, and we hit the curb hard, sideways — the crunch of metal and glass, world trading places with black sky, rolling three times before coming to a stop.

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* * *

Sirens. The creak of a spinning wheel. I looked over, and Veronica was dead. Dead. That look, gone forever — gears in her eyes gone silent and still. The Uspar-Nagoi logo slid from her wound as the necklace phase changed again, expanding to its original size. I thought of labs in Asia, and parallel projects. I thought of necklaces, Veronica saying, *they gave one to all of us.*

I climbed out of the wreck and stood swaying. The sirens closer now. I sprinted the remaining few blocks to her house.

When I got to her front door, I tried the knob. Locked. I stood panting. When I caught my breath, I kicked the door in. I walked inside, up the stairs.

The strand was in Veronica's jewelry box on her dresser. I glanced around the room; it was the last time I'd stand here, I knew, the last time I'd be in her bedroom. I saw the four-poster bed where we'd lain so often, and the grief came down on me like a freight train. I did my best to push it away. Later. Later, I'd deal with it. When there was time. I closed my eyes and saw Veronica's face.

Coming back down the stairs, I stopped. The front door was closed. I didn't remember closing it.

I stood silent, listening.

The first blow knocked me over the chair.

The gray man came, open hands extended, smiling. "I was going to be nice," he said. "I was going to be quick. But then you hit me with a pot."

Some flash of movement, and his leg swung, connecting with the side of my head. "Now I'm going to take my time."

I tried to climb to my feet, but the world swam away, off to the side. He kicked me under my right armpit, and I felt ribs break.

"Come on, stand up," he said. I tried to breathe. Another kick. Another.

I pulled myself up the side of the couch. He caught me with a chipping blow to the face. My lip split wide open, blood pouring onto Veronica's white carpet. His leg came up, connecting with my ribs again. I felt another snap. I collapsed onto my back, writhing in agony. His leg rose and fell as I tried to curl in on myself — some instinct to protect my vital organs. He landed a solid kick to my face and my head snapped back. The world went black.

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He was crouching over me when I opened my eyes. That smile.

"Come on," he said. "Stand up."

He dragged me to my feet and slammed me against the wall. A right hand like iron pinned me to the wall by my throat.

"Where is the strand?"

I tried to speak, but my voice pinched shut. He smiled wider, turning an ear toward me. "What's that?" he said. "I can't hear you."

Some flutter of movement and the other hand came up. He laid the straight razor against my cheek. Cold steel. "I'm going to ask you one more time," he said. "And then I'm going to start cutting slices down your face. I'm going to do it slow, so you can feel it." He eased up on my windpipe just enough for me to draw a breath.

"Now tell me, where is the strand?"

I looped the strand around his wrist. "Right here," I said, and pulled.

There was almost no resistance. The man's hand came off with a thump, spurting blood in a fountain. He dropped the razor to the carpet. He had time to look confused. Then surprised. Like Veronica. He bent for the razor, reaching to pick it up with his other hand, and this time I hooked my arm around his neck, looping the chord tight — and pulled again. Warmth. Like bathwater on my face. He slumped to the floor.

I picked up the razor and limped out the front door.

Eighty-five grand buys you a lot of distance. It'll take you places. It'll take you across continents, if you need it to. It will introduce you to the right people.

There is no carbon-tube industry. Not yet. No monopoly to pay or protect. And the data I downloaded onto the Internet is just starting to make news. Nagoi still comes for me — in my dreams, and in my waking paranoia. A man with a razor. A man with steel in his fist.

Already Uspar-Nagoi stock has started to slide as those long thinkers in the investment sphere gaze into the future and see a world that might, just maybe, be made of different stuff. Uspar-Nagoi made a grab for that European company, but it cost them more than they ever expected to pay. And the carbon project was buried, just as Veronica said it would be. Only now the data is on the net, for anyone to see.

Carbon has this property: it bonds powerfully and promiscuously to

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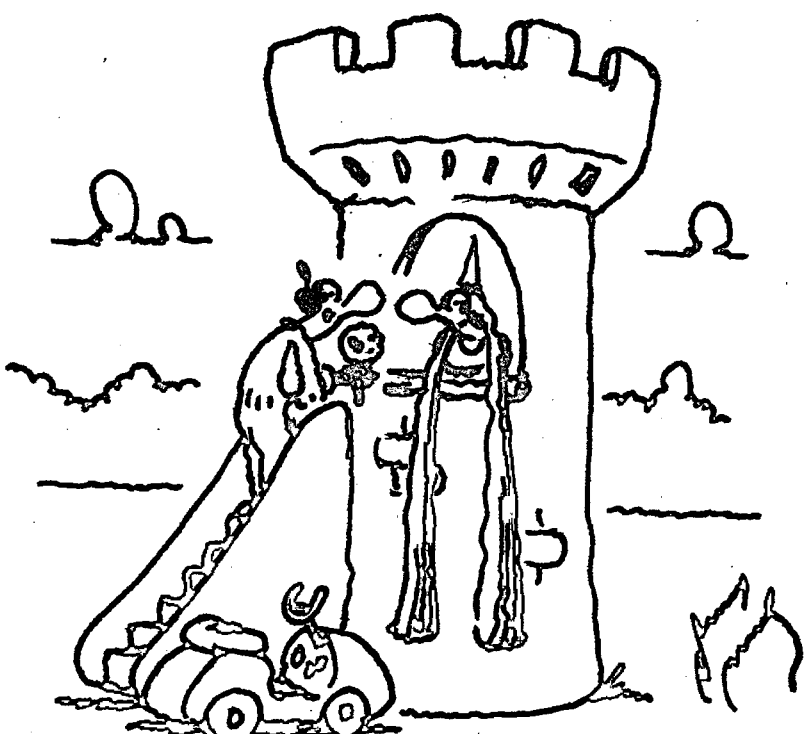
itself. In one form, it is diamond. In another, it builds itself into structures we are just beginning to understand. We are not smarter than the ones who came before us — the ones who built the pyramids and navigated oceans by the stars. If we've done more, it's because we had better materials. What would de Vinci have done with polycarbon? Seven billion people in the world. Maybe now we find out.

Sometimes at night when sleep won't come, I think of what I said to Veronica about alchemy. The art of turning one thing into another. That maybe it's been alchemy all along. ☙



*"I'm your date from eHarmony."*

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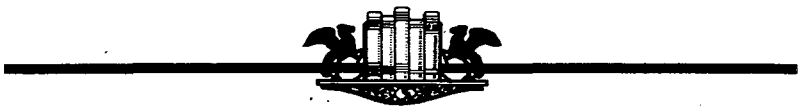

# Books To Look For

## CHARLES DE LINT

*Out of the Wild*, by Sarah Beth Durst, Razorbill, 2008, $15.99.

I REALLY enjoyed Sarah Beth Durst's first novel, *Into the Wild*. In it we were introduced to "the Wild," an entity/place in which the characters from fairy tales are doomed to repeat their stories forever. Or at least they were until Rapunzel defeated the Wild, but at the cost of losing her Prince.

When that first book opens, the Wild is no more than a tangle of vines trapped underneath the bed of Rapunzel's daughter Julie. Rapunzel herself is hiding out in a small Massachusetts town as a hairdresser, along with any number of other fairy tale characters such as Puss'n'Boots (Julie's brother, who's still a cat) and the evil witch who put Rapunzel in the tower (except she's good now, runs the local motel and guards a genuine wishing well).

But the Wild gets loose, swallowing the town and pulling all of its inhabitants into endless repetitions of fairy tales until Julie manages to defeat it and bring things back to normal.

Well, sort of normal.

What I like about *Out of the Wild*, the sequel, is that the ramifications of that earlier invasion by the Wild still hold true. People remember. The town is filled with military guards, researchers, and the inevitable news crews.

But nobody really knows exactly what happened except Rapunzel and the other fairy tale characters, and they're not telling. They just want the fuss to die down so they can get back to their old lives.

Or at least most of them do.

It turns out there's a faction of fairy tale characters who don't like hiding who they are from the world at large. They like using their magics and being part of the stories. So they come up with a plan that results in the Wild being freed

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again, except this time it spreads across North America. Part of that plan is bringing back Rapunzel's Prince who is completely out of time in the modern age, which makes for a lot of entertaining mishaps. There are also great scenes involving multiple giant bean stalks, mobs rioting at Disneyland, dragons in the Grand Canyon....

Durst's second novel is as inventive as the first book, upping the stakes, but not to preposterous heights. Instead, *Out of the Wild* is yet one more example of how, these days, books for younger readers often offer a fresher take on fantasy than do the books ostensibly written for adults.

And this is also one of those rare occasions when the sequel is as good as the first book, if not better. Though, in my estimation, they make two halves of one story, and a wonderfully entertaining story it is.

*Black Magic Woman*, by Justin Gustainis, Solaris Books, 2008, $15.

There's a trick to writing a multiple-viewpoint thriller. It's both frustrating and compelling, but always necessary. When you switch viewpoints, you always leave the first character at a high dramatic point with the reader wanting to find out what happens next *right now*, except they can't. (Hence the frustration.) To keep them on your side, the new viewpoint section had better be gripping. And when you get to the end of the new scene, you have to do it all over again.

It's a bit like riding a number of rollercoasters, all at the same time. What you don't do is stop a section at the natural end of a scene because then there's no impetus for the reader to stay up that hour later than he or she planned because they *have* to read on.

Justin Gustainis doesn't quite have his pacing down yet — or at least not in *Black Magic Woman*. Since the first chapter's apparently based on a short story (and actually has nothing to do with the novel except to introduce one of the main characters), I can understand his difficulty at the start — especially following a prologue that takes a while to connect to the main plotline. But after that, it takes him about a third of the book, with many viewpoint switches, before he finally begins to get the hang of it.

By that point he might have lost some readers.

I know that while I was interested in following how the various

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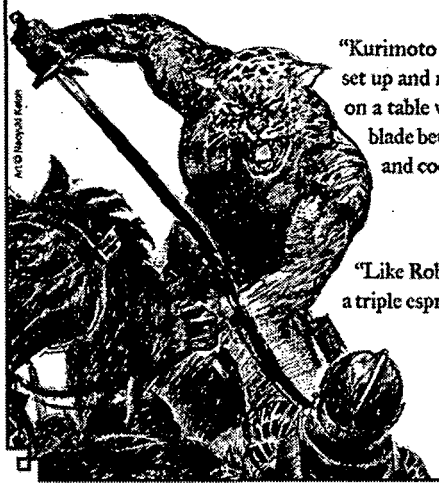
THE GUIN SAGA By Kaoru Kurimoto



"Kurimoto manages the flurry of situations being set up and resolved like the trick of putting a hand on a table with fingers spread out, then stabbing a blade between the outstretched digits. The speed and coordination is that amazing."
—Scott Green, *Ain't It Cool News*

"Like Robert E. Howard crossed with manga and a triple espresso—pure adventure fiction..."
—*Fantasy & Science Fiction* magazine

Read an excerpt at
www.vertical-inc.com/guinsaga

narratives built, I wasn't compelled, and the book sat unread for stretches of time. (One of the tests of a great book is that when you're not reading it, you're thinking about it and can't wait to get back into its pages.)

But I persevered, and the pace did pick up.

In what I assume is the beginning of a series, we're introduced to supernatural investigator Quincey Morris (descendant of the American who went up against Dracula with Van Helsing) and his partner, Libby Chastain, a white witch. Morris is hired by a family to free them from a curse that goes back to the Salem Witch Trials. Once on board, the pair find that they've also become targets of whoever's behind the curse, with the attacks against them escalating in severity.

At the same time South African Detective Sergeant Van Dreenan has come to the States to help the FBI in a case involving a serial murderer—the black magic woman of the book's title, as it turns out. We also get chapters from her viewpoint, and from that of the person behind the Salem curse.

I'm not entirely sure why I kept on going, except that Gustainis does present some interesting

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characters and obviously knows his background material. The latter is different enough from the usual occult thriller to keep it fairly interesting. But it's not until he gets the hang of his pacing, that the novel moves into a higher gear and everything clicks. Bearing that in mind, I'm comfortable recommending the book to you.

And I get the sense that if there's a second book, it will be much better right from the beginning.

*The H-Bomb Girl*, by Stephen Baxter, Faber & Faber, 2008, £9.99

I like the title of this book, as well as its retro-cover that reminds me of an episode of *The Avengers*, or some other sixties spy series. And it certainly doesn't hurt that it's a time travel story.

(Regular readers might recall my fondness for such. But oddly, noting the front cover blurb that cites *Doctor Who* as a touchstone, I realize that the Doctor Who series is something I never got into, neither the TV show nor any of the many franchise novels that came in its wake. But I digress....)

So the book looks good, but I've been burned before — usually from there being too much, and unnecessary, explanation of the story's time traveling mechanism. We don't get that here. What we do get is an absolutely spot-on and delightful visit to Liverpool in the early sixties when the Mersey Beat was just getting off the ground and the city is still recovering from its post-war trauma.

Our viewpoint character is fourteen-year-old Laura Mann in what isn't so much a YA novel as one that simply happens to have a youthful protagonist. She and her friends are just trying to find some fun on Liverpool's dismal gray streets and in its shabby little coffee shops and clubs. They run a little wild — by sixties standards. In today's world their small rebellions would hardly raise an eyebrow.

And if that's all there was, it would be enough. Baxter does a terrific job of recreating the times and the mindset of the characters. The streets and tenements of Liverpool, the schoolyard where Laura and her friends hang out, the dark basement clubs — they all come alive in his capable hands.

But as the story progresses, Laura begins to notice people who seem strangely familiar, almost older versions of herself. And then suddenly there are men following her, obviously out to get her. Military men. Others less easily

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defined. And they all seem to think that she holds the key to how the future will unfold.

When she expresses her fears to her friends, one of them mockingly asks her, "How can you talk about choosing futures? Who do you think you are, the Virgin Mary or Supergirl?"

She's neither, of course, but it turns out that she can choose the future, and as the choices lie in front of her, each one seems darker than the rest.

This being a book written by a British author (the Brits don't seem as concerned about sugarcoating the tales they tell in any medium), I think you'll still be surprised by where Baxter takes his characters, though how it all works out is entirely appropriate to the story.

This is easily one of the better books I've read in a long time.

Material to be considered for review in this column should be sent to Charles de Lint, P. O. Box 9480, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada K1G 3V2.

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# MUSING ON BOOKS

## MICHELLE WEST

*Dust*, by Elisabeth Bear, Bantam Spectra, 2008, $6.99.

*God's Demon*, by Wayne Barlowe, Tor, 2007, $24.95.

*Mister B. Gone*, by Clive Barker, HarperCollins, 2007, $24.95.

I ADMIT, FOR reasons that aren't entirely clear to me, some interest in the Angelic and the Demonic in fiction. I didn't have a particularly religious upbringing (read: none — not the deliberate lack of, one, just...none), but there's something about these mythic inventions that pulls and prods at the debris in my subconscious. This doesn't mean that I actually read books with Angels or Demons in the passionately enthusiastic way (bordering on addiction) that I've seen some people read Vampire fiction — but that tricky "get a potential reader to pick up the book" stage is bypassed; I will almost always pick up a book that has one of these two things somewhere on the cover or in the blurb.

Having done that, I read the blurb, and often instantly put the book back — but not always, as in the case of Elizabeth Bear's latest novel, *Dust*.

Bear's Angel, Perceval, is no mythic creature; she is also no fantasy creature. Her name is not an accident; she is a Knight, from Engine (more on names in a bit). From the outset, in the use of language and the descriptions of Perceval's wings — or lack thereof — it's clear that this is not a fantasy novel; that the fantastic elements are grounded, are reformed, in sf tropes. Bear's prose is the prose of a short story writer — a short story sf writer — it's lovely, tight, and dense; all details are offered on the fly, and in the context of viewpoint.

There are three viewpoints in the book, but two carry most of the narrative weight: Perceval's and Rien's. Rien is a servant in the House

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of Rule; she is a Mean, and the members of the family of Rule are Exalts. Means are, more or less, human; Exalts are other — immortals who decide the fate of Means, when they condescend to notice them at all. Perceval, winged, is also an Exalt, and it is Perceval's capture and mutilation (off-screen) at the hands of Ariane of the House of Rule that start this novel.

Rien is the servant whose task it is to tend to Perceval in her captivity, while the Angel awaits death and absorption. These aren't Rien's normal duties; she doesn't work as a guard or a jailor, but instead cleans, as a menial, the great rooms and corridors of the House itself.

But she is drawn to Perceval, and when Perceval recognizes her, when she calls her by name, Rien begins her own transformation.

This story really has very little to do with Angels, *per se*. Perceval, an Exalt, has lost her wings permanently; while Exalts can survive any physical damage, they rely on their colonies of nanites to repair the damage done to their bodies. But certain weapons can disrupt the programming, destroying the function of these nanites — and Perceval's wings, riven from her by an unblade, are casualties of such a weapon.

Fleeing her prison in the House of Rule with the aid of Rien, Perceval sets out to prevent the war that it seems clear Ariane is planning between Rule and Engine — two large communities that exist in this world called Jacob's Ladder.

The third viewpoint, then, is the viewpoint of one Jacob Dust. Jacob Dust is not a biological creature: he is one fragment of Israfel, the guiding AI of Jacob's Ladder, which was forced to split itself into component pieces so that it might survive. Survival was imperative, and each of these fragments is driven by the need to survive. Dust is the fragment of the consciousness of Israfel that keeps memory. He is opposed by Samael, who is the Angel of Death — or, in less mythic terms, Life support; and Asrafil, the ship's weapons. They all understand that to survive, Jacob's Ladder must, after centuries in orbit, begin to move again — and to move, there must be one cohesive entity into which all subsidiary functions are subsumed. Each merely wants to be the dominant personality in that reabsorption. So they are working toward the same goals, but in entirely different ways.

And what they need — what each of them needs — is an heir apparent to the title of *Captain*.

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They have chosen their heirs, but the heir is decided by primogeniture, which severely limits their choices: Dust, should he be able to coerce Perceval into serving him, has the best claimant, because by birth, the title is hers.

If she survives.

Bear's language, pacing, and the gradual unfolding of the mysteries of the world of Jacob's Ladder are pitch-perfect here. Her choice of character names, rather than being a gloss, resonate with the story she's chosen to tell, evoking the echoes of myth while creating entirely new ones; she's playing with tropes, and the synergy of that play is this book —but she makes it work. She makes her Perceval real, her Rien substantive, and their quest to save the world they know meaningful.

When I hit the end of the book, there was a one-page announcement of an upcoming sequel — but had there been no sequel I would have been completely satisfied by the book as it stands. That said, I'm happily looking forward to next year's *Chill*.

Barlowe's Angels are fallen Angels — or, as they're more often called, demons, and his architecture is not the gritty and run-down orbital derelict of Bear's devising. Instead, he's turned his gaze upon Hell itself: the Hell that resulted from Lucifer's fall.

In this regard, *God's Demon* takes a much more traditional approach to the demonic or the angelic than Bear's novel does, and as such, its canvas is epic and much less recognizably human than the evolved world of Jacob's Ladder.

Where Bear has self-contained habitats in various states of repair, Barlowe has the vast panorama of the damned and their keepers: the lost souls, and the demons who chose to follow Lucifer.

Sargatanas is one such demon, the ruler of the city of Adamantinarx. Adamantinarx is called "the City that Fell from Heaven" by those who do not live within its boundaries, and in the context of Hell and the Fallen, it is a city that strives for dignity, where there is so little.

Barlowe's Hell is an interesting place. There are creatures who existed in Hell before the fall, and the fall itself seems to have preserved the ranks of the Seraphim, converting those who lead into those who rule. The creatures that existed before have been tamed or subjugated (although tribes of creatures still roam the wastelands that exist in the spaces around the cities that

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rose in the wake of the Fallen). The souls, tempted and trapped, have become the essential building blocks of those cities — literally, rather than figuratively — and for the most part, like the Fallen, they remember little of the life they lived before they ended up in Hell.

In a chance encounter with a soul, during the construction of one of the many buildings in the vast city of Adamantinarx, Lord Sargatanas is reminded, forcefully, of all that he was before the fall; he is reminded of what he has lost. The soul doesn't want to be turned into a brick (the concept works better on Barlowe's page than on this one), and is strong enough, defiant enough, to do more than wail or beg. Sargatanas nonetheless turns the woman into a brick, but in so doing, is ultimately reminded of the pointlessness of his existence. Heaven, lost in the fall, has never been remembered so clearly by Sargatanas as it is after this encounter.

He becomes determined to regain it somehow.

But to regain it, he must be worthy of Heaven, and in Hell that is impossible.

There are those among the Fallen who choose to remember, however painful memory is; there are those who choose to forget, and those who choose to deny all previous existence. The ruler of Hell, Beelzebub, is one of the latter, and it is against Beelzebub that Sargatanas must prevail to win what he seeks.

This book is a lot like what you would get if you mixed the spectacle and scope of a DeMille movie (in all its essential conservatism) with Clive Barker. Barlowe's vision of the look and feel of Hell is the vision of a visual artist: it's clearly real to him and he seems to describe, in large part, what he has forced himself to see. In that sense, the book succeeds; Barlowe's vision of Hell feels stylistic and oddly medieval.

The quest Sargatanas undertakes — a rebellion against Hell in order to regain the gates of Heaven — is also intriguing, because of course, Hell is about the lack of redemption, and seeking redemption itself is a task worthy of an Angel.

But redemption always seems — to me — to be a more personal affair, and while Barlowe's work captures scale and scope, in the end, his Hell and his demons could easily fit onto the grimmer canvases captured by fantasy writers whose demons — or angels — are

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not so emeshed in existing mythology. His demons, outwardly visually different, fit into a hierarchical static system, and it flattens them; if Hell is vast, there are, ultimately, variations on a theme, but no large differences, none of the essentially individual elements, that would make hell and damnation personal or unique.

The outcome is not suprising, with one exception: the character of a slave (a soul) and the way he hovers on the edge of the same redemption Sargatanas is seeking. His choice illuminates Barlowe's Heaven and Hell.

There was enough in the book to keep me interested in the Hell of Barlowe's devising, and I finished it, but I'm not sure it will work for people who don't already have some of the same interests that I do.

And the last of the three books in this month's theme is the newest novel by Clive Barker. I'm not generally much of a horror reader — I know I said this last column as well — but Barker's work is compelling to me, and this was true even of the Books of Blood, which were almost definitive horror when they were published.

*Mister B Gone* takes, as a central conceit, a demon, one somewhat aptly named Jakobok Botch, who speaks to the reader from the printed page — literally. He wants you to burn the book in your hands, and alternates between pleas, threats, and cajoling.

To tempt the reader, Jakobok parcels out bits and pieces of his life story, interrupting his exhortations to destroy the book with glimpses of his life: his early life in Hell with an abusive father, his later life when, fished out of Hell, he makes his escape from his captors (who, after all, consider him of negligible value, but are willing to boil and skin him anyway). He occasionally, like the most focused of men, gets sidetracked by the details of his own life, and the fascination of his own compulsions, but always returns to his demand that the book in hand be burned.

The most interesting of these scenarios is Quintoon, another demon-living-in-the-human world, who takes Jakobok under his figurative wing and teaches him how to live among humans, alternately preying on them and enjoying the things they produce as the two travel through the time and space of Europe. There is a very unsubtle class distinction between Quintoon and Jakobok — Jakobok being the equivalent of trailer trash, and

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Quintoon being the more urbane, educated equivalent of a landed noble. It exists in their understanding, their language, their ability to manipulate words.

...which is interesting, because Jakobok's life eventually leads him to Gutenberg, and thus to the printing press, and on to a variant of eternal damnation (which, one supposes, is the lot of demons anyway. But I digress).

The problem with this book is that the metaphor, the power of words, works — it's the type of metaphor that you appreciate more as you break the book down into the component parts that uphold and underscore it; it's the story itself, containing all these disparate elements, that fails to gel.

Well, there's also the fact that it's not really horrifying or horrific (I have *got* to stop reading cover blurbs). What works in this book: the tangled relationship, the unequal relationship, of Quintoon and Jakobok, and the oddly beautiful and savage glimpses of the war between angels and demons in the streets of Gutenberg's Europe. Barker captures the tangled obsession, the compulsion and the lack of sense or sensibility, of one type of love, better than most writers, with far fewer words, and I think it's safe to say that in his glimpse of the battleground through which most of us walk unaware, there's a sense of otherness, a sense of the alien, that lifts the conflict itself outside of our reach — but lets it hover, and therefore tantalize because there's a chance if we look at it in just the right way, we might for an eye-blink, understand the mysteries.

What works less well: the story, which has a curiously truncated feel; it's as if the book is either too long or too short; too much left out, or too much included. I personally didn't mind Jakobok's constant whining, pleading, or threats, but can see how these might wear on the nerves.

I still think it's worth reading, but adjust expectations accordingly, and read for the things Barker does well.

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*Mary Thornburg's short fiction has appeared in* Zahir *and* Cicada *magazines. Her first novel,* Underland, *was reviewed in our April 2007 issue. In her online biography, she says that although she has lived in Montana for the last decade, she is not a native Montanan (though her parents were). Her first story to appear in* F&SF *has an intriguing mystery at its heart.*

# Fergus

## *By Mary Patterson Thornburg*

BEFORE HER DEATH IN THE first year of this century, my friend Eileen and I spent several weeks every summer visiting at each other's home, hers in the small city of Granville, mine in an old river town two states away. We were both teachers, so we had most summers free. And we were both animal lovers, so we brought our pets with us when we visited; happily, Eileen's succession of labs — Potsie, Bailey, and, in a burst of originality, Rover — got along well with my succession of cats.

The last time I went to Eileen's house in Granville was in the summer of 1999. My old cat, Circe, had died the previous fall, and I brought along a new one, an adolescent butterscotch tabby I called Fergus. I had adopted him from the local shelter only a couple of weeks before, and apparently had not mentioned his name to Eileen.

When I let him out of his carrier and introduced him, she stared.

"What on earth inspired you to name him *that*?"

"Fergus?" I said. "He just sort of looked like a Fergus, I guess. Why,

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don't you like it?" As I spoke, I realized that her question — her exclamation, really — was a genuine objection to the name.

Instead of answering, she got up from the kitchen table, where we'd been sitting with coffee, and went into the living room. In a few moments she was back with an envelope, and from it she took a snapshot. Glancing at it in her hand, I saw only that it was of two people, both with dark hair and narrow faces, dressed in darkish clothing.

"This was *my* Fergus," she said. From her tone I knew that she was deeply and strangely moved.

"My God, Eileen. If I'd known there was someone in your life named Fergus, I'd never have called a cat that. But I — "

"I know. I've never told anyone. Not just you, Jill. No one. No one I know now. Never showed this to anyone." She handed me the photo and I looked at it. I saw that it was of a young man holding a child in his arms, so that their heads were nearly level. It was not a good photograph; their faces were in shadow, hard to make out. But the resemblance between them was clear.

"My husband, Colum," she said. "Fergus was our little boy. That's my only picture of him — of either of them. He was three then." She sat back down and took a sip of her coffee. Her hand was shaking very slightly.

Finally, I thought of something to say. "Why?" I asked.

"Why haven't I told you before? I almost did once, Jill. When you told me about your marriage. But something, I don't know, wouldn't let me. It's just been so long that I haven't mentioned it. I try not to think of it, and actually I don't, not often. It's as if it was another life. A dream. It's not something I talk about."

"That's not what I meant. I mean, why — *now*? Because of this cat? I'll change his name. It's nothing to me. He never answers to it anyway — or, rather, he answers to anything. So he's Lucas, okay? Same weight, the words. He'll recognize it." I was babbling. Eileen and I had been friends for twenty years, and now it seemed that in a way she was a stranger.

"I don't know. Not the cat." He'd jumped into her lap, friendly beast that he was, and she stroked him and smiled, absolving him of responsibility. "Maybe it was just time." She looked at me. "Do you want to hear it?"

"Of course," I said. "If you want to tell it."

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* * *

Colum was Irish, she said. Not born in Ireland, but conceived there, born in Philadelphia only a few months after his parents had immigrated. "He didn't speak with an accent really, but you could tell somehow in the rhythms of his voice. He was an only child and his parents were very protective of him. He looked exactly like his father—I mean *exactly*, only forty years younger. They were old to be first-time parents, in those days. It's more common now. People sometimes thought Colum was their grandson."

"Handsome," I murmured, to be saying something. The photo still lay on the table between us.

"Not really, but I thought so. He was only an inch taller than I, if that. Very Celtic. Sweet smile."

They had met in junior high and married four years later, the day after their high school graduation. Eileen's parents had not been particularly happy about the marriage, but it seems that Colum's had. Neither she nor Colum had planned to go to college: they were entertainers, folksingers. It was to be their career. They were very good, she said, and they expected to go far. Both played guitar, Colum a mandolin, too, and a penny whistle, and Eileen a hammered dulcimer.

"We called ourselves The Reillys," she said. "Which we were, of course. It was Colum's family name. I took my own back, afterward."

She paused. After *what*, I wanted to ask. But she'd tell me in her own time. There'd been someone else, a woman my parents had known, whose ex-husband had kidnapped their two-year-old son, and no one had really bothered to help her look for him: the law, in those days, suspected that a boy belonged with his father. I wondered if something like that had happened to Eileen. She spoke of Colum in the past tense, though, as if he were dead. Perhaps he and the child were both dead. But then she was using past tense for herself as well.

"We had as many bookings as we could handle, all in the local area still, of course. You wouldn't have heard of us, Jill, unless you were particularly interested in that sort of thing. We did a lot of Irish music, songs and tunes Colum knew from his parents. A lot of other stuff too, of course. I had red hair and my name was Eileen. People thought we were both Irish, brother and sister maybe. Our agent thought it was good to be

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ambiguous. But when I got pregnant our publicity started to say we were married. We were twenty. We kept playing right up to the night before he was born. Fergus. We loved it — the traveling, the hotels, everything. We were having the time of our lives."

Eileen took a week off after the baby came, but then she went back on the road with Colum, bringing the baby with them. Her parents were appalled, but Eileen told them it would be disastrous to interrupt their burgeoning career. They had got bookings close to home, and Colum mostly carried the shows for the first couple of months, with Eileen coming on for a song or two at the end of each set.

"Then, at the end, I'd bring Fergus out for a minute. People went wild. He slept in a little basket backstage. He was such a good little baby, never fussy. He seemed to enjoy the music and the people as much as we did."

This went on for the next four years. Fergus traveled with his parents most of the time, except for a couple of months every year when he stayed with one set of grandparents or the other. It was, Eileen said, like what she'd read about the lives of vaudeville entertainers or traveling players in Europe. People wondered if the constant traveling put a strain on their family, their marriage. But Eileen said no.

"I'm not making this up, Jill. I know — it might seem like I'm idealizing something that wasn't ideal at all. But I'm not. We were, well, *ideal*. It's the only word. We had each other, our music, books, our van. It was all we wanted. We camped out a lot of times, in parks or sometimes at the farms of people we met. We studied, Colum and I, because we'd decided to home-school Fergus — we were already doing it, in fact. And teaching him music. He had a little fiddle, one-eighth size, the sweetest thing." Eileen's eyes were dry, but when she said this she gave a sudden, racking sob.

I leaned toward her. "Eily, *stop*! Don't talk about it any more now. You don't have to. You can tell me later."

"No, I want to go on. I want you to hear it all."

The bad thing had happened in Granville. The city was their first stop in a tour that took in several Midwestern states, an expansion of their usual territory to coincide with the release of their first recording. They were excited — about the record, about the tour. They were going to be crossing the Mississippi for the first time.

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Fergus had just turned four.

They'd decided to park their van and stay for two nights at a recently refurbished old hotel in the center of the city. They'd played their first show on the first night at a downtown auditorium. Their second scheduled show was the next afternoon in the same auditorium, intended expressly for schoolchildren. It was within walking distance of the hotel, and they'd locked their instruments in a backstage dressing room. Fairly early that morning, then, they left their sixth-floor room to go downstairs to the coffee shop for breakfast.

They'd rung for the elevator when Colum remembered that he'd left his wallet in the room. "Get it later," Eileen said. "I've got money." But he didn't feel safe leaving it, and it would take only a minute. While they held this conversation, the elevator arrived and its doors slid open. Fergus dashed into it and pushed a button. The doors began to slide shut.

"*Fergus*! Wait for us!" Eileen cried, and hurried toward the closing doors. She was too late, and she heard Fergus wail. She touched the button to bring the car back, but it went on its way. "Which way is it going?" she gasped. Neither of them knew.

They stared at each other, bemused, for a second, and then Colum sprinted for the stairs, which were behind them and a few yards away. "You run down to the lobby," he yelled as he went. "I'll go up. If he's upstairs I'll bring him down. You stay down there."

On the first landing, Eileen glanced around. The hall was empty. Remembering how slow the elevator was, she decided to run all the way to the lobby. If the car were to be stopped on a floor between there and the sixth, it would almost surely be going down again. Would Fergus get out if it stopped? She didn't know. When she got to the lobby she saw the clocklike signal above the elevator door, showing with an arrow the slow descent: third floor, second. So he must have pushed the "lobby" button, the first one in the row, she thought. She sighed with relief as the arrow arrived at "L."

The doors opened. The car was empty.

She looked wildly around. The lobby, too, was almost empty, except for a small group of people in business suits just outside the coffee shop door. A teenaged boy wearing a maroon uniform leaned against the front counter, talking to the clerk behind the counter, who was yawning. One

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of the women in the business group looked impatiently at her watch. Eileen didn't know what to do. Should she get on the elevator? Start up the stairs again? Wait? She waited for a moment, then pushed the elevator button. The doors opened again. She stepped in, held the "Door Open" button, and looked at the controls. There must be a basement in the hotel, but the lowest floor indicated here was the one she was on. There were ten floors in all. She got back out of the car.

She tried to think. Poor Fergus. He had pushed another button and gotten out of the elevator, but where? He must be scared to death. But maybe not. *She* was scared, and probably Colum was scared, but that didn't mean Fergus was. He liked to explore. At whatever floor he was on, he would be wandering down the hall, looking at all the doors. If he found one open.... A new fear overtook her now. She started toward the stairs and then stopped. What if he came down while she was going up? She didn't think he'd get on the elevator again, not on his own, but you never knew. She would have to tell the desk clerk.

Just then Colum appeared, coming down the stairway. "Where is he?"

She shook her head. "I don't know. Not here. My God — "

"He's nowhere up there, that I could see. Where *could* he be?"

"We need to get help," she said.

THEY ENLISTED THE AID of the bellboy, who thought their problem was funny until Colum informed him very convincingly that it was not. The bellboy told the desk clerk, who called the housekeeping manager, who called the day manager, who eventually called the police. The hotel was searched carefully: every hallway, every room, every closet, the basement, even the roof, although the door to the roof had been locked all night. The staff was questioned closely, even the guests were questioned closely. No one had seen a little dark-haired boy in the building.

Colum and Eileen canceled their afternoon performance, the first time they had ever done such a thing. The police captain in charge of the official search informed the chief, and the search was expanded to the entire downtown area and, eventually, to the entire city. Fergus's picture and his description were distributed to the state police. The county search and rescue department brought a pair of mournful bloodhounds to the

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hotel, and the hounds were given articles of Fergus's clothing to smell. They immediately followed the scent out of the sixth-floor room, down the hall, and into the elevator. There they stopped.

"We stayed at the hotel for a week," Eileen said. "The people didn't charge us. They were very nice. We stayed in the room, one of us, and the other sat in the lobby. When we got too crazy, we went out and walked around the streets. We called and called."

The rest of their tour was canceled, and their agent, worried, came to Granville to talk with them when her telephone calls proved unsatisfactory. "You're not doing any good here," she said. "You know that, you both know it. The police are doing everything they can. The FBI is looking for your boy, for God's sake. You're not going to find him here all by yourselves. And you're going to drive yourselves mad doing what you're doing. Go back to work."

It would have been the most intelligent thing to do, but they didn't do it. They couldn't stay in the hotel any longer, so they rented an apartment. They fought, which they'd never done before. They stopped making love. They nearly stopped eating. They started to drink, heavily. At night they fell into bed, drunk, and in the morning they woke to a gray horror.

"I think we would have killed each other," Eileen said, "except that Colum's mother died suddenly. He went back to Philadelphia for the funeral, and he called me from there. He was going to stay with his father. It was like a phone call from a stranger."

Eventually Eileen forced herself to stop drinking and to start taking care of herself. When she ran out of money, her parents sent her a small allowance every month, enough to pay her rent. She got a job clerking in a local store. When she had lived alone in Granville for two years, she decided to go to college. Of the high school courses she remembered, she had liked mathematics best, so she declared that as her major at Rose State University and in four years, working full time and going to school full time, she graduated and was offered a fellowship. She finished her master's degree and stayed on, teaching math courses to general education students. That was where I met her, when I had taught for five years and was struggling through the requirements for my own master's.

And Colum? "He lived with his father for a few years, still drinking. We never talked to each other, but I kept in touch with his dad and heard

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about him that way. Then his dad died, and a few months after that Colum was in a wreck, driving drunk they said, and was killed. My sister called me about it. I went back to the funeral. Colum hadn't been wearing a seat belt and was thrown out of the car — it was a single-car accident, a rollover, so no one else was hurt. I looked at him in his casket, and he looked young. Sweet, like he had when we first met. Happy. Not a care in the world."

I stared at her. "Dear Lord, Eileen. Dear God. And you never saw your boy again."

"Oh, I saw him," she said. "Twice."

"*What*?"

"The first time was just after I'd started teaching. It was a Saturday morning. I'd driven to a mall in Indianapolis to shop for shoes. The shoe store I liked here had closed, and it was hard to get fitted anywhere else. I was just coming out of the store when I saw him walk by, holding onto a woman's hand. He saw me too and dropped her hand. He ran right over to me. Laughing. Like he couldn't believe he'd found me again. I dropped my packages and grabbed him. He put his arms around me and hugged me, hard. Then the woman turned around and saw us. '*Fergus*!' she yelled. He looked at her, looked at me again, sighed, struggled to get down. When he was on his feet he ran back to her.

"Naturally, I ran after them, tried to get her to stop. She had him by the hand and was practically dragging him along, but she finally did stop. 'Get away from me, woman,' she said, very low, 'and stay away from my little boy. I want to see you walk away, or I'll get security after you. Do you understand?' She was a tall woman, younger than me, with short black hair. I can still see what she looked like."

"But didn't you get security yourself?"

"No, of course not. That was just after I'd started teaching, Jill. Seven years after we lost Fergus. He was four, then, so he'd have been eleven. This little boy was no more than four. Maybe a little younger. When Fergus was four he was pretty heavy for me to pick up. This child wasn't so heavy."

"But the same name?"

"I don't know. I convinced myself it was coincidence, even though I knew it wasn't. It was Fergus. But...." She let the sentence trail off.

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"Did you tell anybody?"

"No. Colum was gone by then, dead. There was no one else to tell."

I waited for a few moments. She was staring at me — no, staring *through* me. I stared back. Eileen's red hair was faded now, a brittle, pinkish gray. Her face was pale and mottled; she looked older than her fifty-four years. Yet her blue eyes were bright and wide open. Watchful, I thought. Waiting. "Twice, you said?"

She nodded. "The second time was here in Granville, about nine years after that. Fergus would have been almost twenty. I'd bought my house by then and was driving home from class one day. I happened to look at some kids playing on the sidewalk. There were four of them, around eight or nine years old, I'd say, and this one much younger. Fergus. I pulled over and stopped, got out of the car, and he looked up at me. I ran over to the kids, and he ran in my direction. '*Mommy*! ' he yelled. I knelt down and he ran into my arms and we held onto each other.

"Then one of the older kids came over and looked at us. 'You're not his mom,' he said.

"'I know it,' I said. I was going to be cool this time. 'Who *is* his mom, do you know? Where does he live?'

"The older boy pointed to a yellow house a few doors away. I got him to go with me, and I walked with Fergus to the door and rang the bell. The woman opened the door and rolled her eyes. 'Fergus,' she said. 'I didn't see you leave.' Then she looked at me. 'Has he — has he been in trouble?' she asked. 'He's only just four. Honest to God, I thought he was in the front room watching TV. He can't have been gone very long.'

"I knew she was telling the truth, partly because I knew that was the kind of child Fergus was — not sneaky, but quiet and independent. She was afraid she was going to get in trouble for letting him wander away. So I convinced her I wouldn't turn her in, and she asked me if I wanted a cup of coffee, and we talked. I didn't say anything about Fergus, and that was hard. But I asked her about him, and she told me he was adopted. He'd apparently been found abandoned in downtown Granville when he was a tiny baby. The woman's husband was a policeman, and they'd been trying for years to have a child. So they were lucky, she said, to be able to adopt this one.

"'He doesn't look anything like either of us,' she said, 'but he feels like

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he's my own.' She smiled then. 'And he *is* my own, of course, isn't he? You'd think I'd keep better track of him.' She'd fastened the chain on the front door, too high for Fergus to reach unless he dragged a chair over, and he'd never have done that."

"Did you tell her about — about — " I didn't know how to finish.

"No. What would have been the point? I didn't want her to think I was crazy. I had some idea of keeping in touch with her, with Fergus, but after a few months they moved to Colorado, so I never did. I checked on her story, though, and it was true; the baby had been found four years before in the hotel lobby, wrapped in blankets, in one of the big chairs. The night clerk had dozed off, just for a few minutes, and when he woke up he heard Fergus crying." I looked at her. "*You* think I'm crazy, don't you."

"No," I said. "No I don't. I don't know why, and I don't know what to think, but I don't think that."

"Well, that's good, then. Thank you. And thanks for listening." She picked up the photo and put it back in its envelope. "And now I don't want to talk about it any more, please. Not now."

We never talked about it again. I used to think of it often, and of course it occurred to me that Eileen *was* crazy — gently so, and who could have blamed her? And I wondered what had happened to Fergus.

She came to visit at my house the next summer, and we exchanged telephone calls and emails, and then, starting in February 2001, I didn't hear from her for a while. Her message machine was always on when I called, but she never called back, and she didn't answer my letters. After a month and a half of this I was alarmed. But then one evening I called her and someone answered — not Eileen, but a woman with a voice much like hers. It was her sister, Doris. Eileen was very ill, she said. She had been in the hospital, but was out again now. She would call me the next day if that was all right.

Of course it was all right. But the next day Eileen didn't call, and late that evening I called her house again. The sister answered. Eileen had died early that morning; somehow I had known that was what she would say. She told me when and where the funeral would be held.

At the church I talked with Doris, who was in her late forties, six or seven years younger than Eileen. She was worried about what to do with Rover, the chocolate lab who was now getting to be an elderly dog. "I hate

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to send him to the animal shelter," she said, "but I don't know what else to do. My husband doesn't want a dog, even Eileen's."

"Why don't I take him?" I asked. "I've known him since he was a puppy and he's stayed at my house several times. He'll feel right at home there."

"Oh, would you? That would be just wonderful. Thank heavens." She'd been crying, off and on, for days, and her eyes were red-rimmed, but she smiled now. "My sister told me you were her best friend, Jill," she said. "I want to thank you for that. For — for being like a sister to her. I never was, somehow. We were family, but we weren't friends, not really."

I thought she would start to cry again, so I looked around. "I think it's time we went in, don't you? The Mass is about to start, I believe. I talked to the priest earlier and he said he'd make it as quick and keep it as short as possible."

I had wondered briefly why Eileen hadn't let me know about her illness, but in fact I knew the answer to that. We'd been friends, but not family. She hadn't told me about it for the same reason she'd never told me, for all those years, about her marriage and her son. She didn't talk about those things. Her silence about them didn't hurt me now, and I certainly didn't resent her for it.

It was a big church and the crowd was very small, a few people whom I recognized from Eileen's department, a few of her neighbors whom I had met. The ones I didn't know seemed to know each other. We all gathered near to the front of the church and the communion rail. But there was one person who seemed to be a stranger to everyone else; at least, he came in just after the ceremony had started and didn't move to the front with the rest of us. I glanced around at him, saw that he was an elderly man, dressed neatly in a suit and topcoat, and looked away again. He was standing in the center aisle of the church and then I heard him move into one of the middle pews.

The funeral Mass progressed. True to his word, the priest seemed to hurry through it, and when it came time for him to speak a eulogy for Eileen, he kept it short. He had admired and respected her, he said. And he hadn't known her very well. She had lived a useful, productive life, teaching young people the beautiful truths of numbers. She had seemed to him full of grief, but she had never confided in him, and perhaps not in

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anyone else. Now that was all over, the priest said. Her grief was finished and her joy might begin. When he stopped speaking and walked back to the altar, I heard the man behind me sob softly. Quite shamelessly, I turned and looked at him. He was holding a big white handkerchief up to his face, and he blew his nose resoundingly. I turned away again.

When the pallbearers had carried Eileen's casket through the church doors and the rest of us had risen to follow them, I looked for the man and saw that he still sat where he'd been sitting. I waited, then, just inside the inside doors, and when the rest had left I went back and stood in the aisle beside him. He looked up at me, nodded, and slid out of the pew. We stood together for a few moments, neither of us saying anything. He was a couple of inches shorter than I and, I judged, at least ten years older. Older than I, older than Eileen. His hair was thick but receding, absolutely white. His forehead was liver-spotted. He had brown eyes that had begun, as old people's will, to fade into grayish blue, the eyes of the aged and the very young come full circle. I had seen his face before.

"Were you her good friend?" he asked. "I think you must have been. I'm glad you were here to see her off, as it were. *Bon voyage.*" He smiled, very charmingly, with his mouth closed. He has bad teeth, I thought. His own, but bad. And he had spoken with a strong Irish accent.

"Yes, I was," I told him, and held out my right hand. "Jill Evans."

He took my hand firmly and shook it, and I waited. "It's good to meet you, Jill Evans," he said. But he didn't say his own name. "She was a fine woman," he said. "A lovely singer."

Then he let go of my hand and started to turn toward the door. "*Sir,*" I said. "What is your name, please?"

He turned around again. "Oh, I'm sorry," he said. "Declan. My name is Declan O'Leary. No relation to the lady in Chicago."

"Mr. O'Leary," I said. "You seem quite — quite familiar to me. I'm almost sure we've met before. Somewhere...."

He smiled again, sweetly. "Oh, no, I don't believe so," he said. "I would have remembered, I think. But you may have known someone who looked very like me?"

I nodded.

"That would have been my brother," he said. "My twin brother, gone these many years now. *Fergus*, his name was. Fergus."

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*Al Michaud remains cagey about providing personal information. Is he the same Al Michaud who recently made headlines in Dover, NH, when he refused to shake the hand of Mitt Romney? Is he the Al Michaud who penned the nostalgic novel* A Twig Grows in Springdale? *Or the author of* Mediocrity in Ten Easy Steps? *He's not the person named in Massachusetts District Court case 1:2007cv10117, Interscope Records and Capital Records, Inc. et al v. Michaud (that Al is an Albert), but which one(s) is he?*

*The internet holds no answers.*

*We do, however, know that he introduced us to the denizens of Clapboard Island, ME, in our July 2003 issue and then tickled our funnybones in "Ayuh, Clawdius" (Mar. 2005). And we know that you can read "Clem Crowder's Catch" on our Website this month. But those other mysteries will have to go unsolved for now. We recommend instead that you take a look at the mysteries buried herein.*

# The Salting and Canning of Benevolence D.

## *By Al Michaud*

CLEM CROWDER WOULD have screamed if not for the clammy fingers lodged between his teeth and tongue. What came out instead was a childish burble of fear.

"Oh, it's not as bad as all *that*," said Dunky, extricating his fingers from Clem's mouth and pressing down his jaw for a look inside. He struck a match and angled it for light, oblivious to the phantom visitant materializing some ten feet off his backside. "Why jus' yistidy I hauled out Granny Feagle's last tooth, an' she didn't so much as flinch."

Clem stared past the flickering match, over Dunky's shoulder, at the phantom. It gathered itself up from the gloom, growing more distinct with each passing moment. A young lady, Clem realized. He could see her clearly now. What's more, he *recognized* her.

"That new tooth's a-lookin' good, Clem," said Dunky. "She's sot in there right proper." Dunky Drinkwater was a clamdigger by trade, but when tides were high he rounded out his take-home with the practice of dentistry. Sixteen bits covered the extraction of an offending tooth, a slug

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of whiskey to ease the process, and the insertion of an eye-pleasing replacement that was carefully fashioned of whatever materials he might have to hand.

The phantom took full form. She would have been sad-eyed and weeping, thought Clem, if she had still had her head. Its removal in life yet stained the collar of her rough, homespun dress. Clem let fly a moan of horror, causing Dunky's match to flicker wildly and die.

"What's got inta yeou?" demanded Dunky, throwing the spent match to the floor. He caught the look in Clem's eyes and it bristled the hair on the back of his neck. Reluctantly he turned.

The headless woman stood at the center of the dim fishhouse, the rear wall of lobster buoys visible through her form. In one arm she cradled a ghostly infant that stared at them with eyes like colorless jellies.

Dunky liberated the scream that Clem could not manage.

The phantom reached out. Clem and Dunky flew from their seats and pressed against the far wall. Clem snatched a lantern from the shelf and held it at arm's length. Dunky fumbled another match from his pocket and struck it across his trouser leg, firing it to life, but before he could touch it to the lantern's wick the phantom faded into nothingness.

"My gorry," Dunky gasped. "Th' Silent Woman."

"Ayuh," Clem replied, little expressing the terror that seized his vitals and withered his heart. The Silent Woman. In his fishhouse. Dunky had witnessed it, and recognized her too, as would any native of Clapboard Island. She was a celebrity of sorts, a creature of local legend whose fearsome mark had been left on generations of folktales and sea chanteys. Why a centuries-old apparition would suddenly manifest itself in his fishhouse he didn't know, but a lifetime of relentless hard luck told him that, chances were, this was far from the last of it.

"It curdles the blood," said Mrs. Crowder when the Silent Woman appeared again the following evening. "The thought of it! I'll not spend another night in this fishhouse, I can guarantee ye that, Mr. Crowder!"

"I'll git th' hammock, Mother," Clem said. "We'll rough it on th' boat."

The next night the apparition came again. Clem wondered how it managed to find its way from the fishhouse to the lobster boat, as in the popular mind such things were generally restricted to but one haunting

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ground. Mrs. Crowder flashed her husband an accusatorial eye, her ingrown belief that he was the font of her every misfortune foremost in her mind.

"What know ye of th' Silent Woman?" Clem asked Admiral Seabury Gwynn several days and as many sightings later, when the question seemed reasonably apropos.

"Jus' as much as th' next man," said Admiral Seabury. "An' not one whit more." These days the retired old seadog whiled away his afternoons beside the checkerboard on the front stoop of the Pogey House, swapping yarns and crowning kings.

Clem leaned against the cracker-barrel that served as a table. "Were she evil-minded, do ye think?"

"Full o' wicked intent, as near as I can calculate," said the admiral, thumbing tobacco into a white meerschaum pipe. "Lookit what she done to poor Cap'n Hellenbach."

Clem knew the old stories, how the Silent Woman mysteriously appeared one ill-fated day on Captain Hellenbach's schooner and commenced a haunting spree that aroused a vigorous dread in both captain and crew. In the end, after countless attempts to expel her ghostly tenant, the schooner was towed out to deep water and sunk, and the Silent Woman was never seen again.

Until now.

"Ye surmise she bore Cap'n Hellenbach ill will, then?" Clem asked, his eyes wandering over the intricate contours of the admiral's pipe, the bowl of which was carved in the likeness of the figurehead maiden that had once adorned the prow of the admiral's merchant vessel.

"They say she harnted him to an early grave," Admiral Seabury said, drawing smoke through his pipe in lengthy puffs. "I don't call that Christian charity."

"Wa-al now, she weren't so much a-harntin' Cap'n Hellenbach, I should think," Clem replied, "as she was his schooner."

"I'll allow 'twere th' schooner she harnted," Admiral Seabury said at length, as sure of it as anything. "Harnts an' such, they're obliged to roam just one partic'lar locality...a house, a ship, a boneyard, what have ye. They don't latch onta th' livin'."

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"Don't latch onta th' livin'," Clem agreed, as if a repetition of the statement would somehow bind it as a universal law. He felt better, even as the sun slipped below the horizon, abandoning the stoop to the muted light of the lantern that hung from its eaves.

"Truth be known, I don't put much stock in them ol' tales, m'self," Admiral Seabury said. "Seein' is believin', I allers say, an' I ain't never seen no such creature as a...a...ah...aahh...."

Clem glanced up at the admiral, who was now clutching his pipebowl with force enough to fracture it, knuckles as white as the meerschaum. With a resounding *crack* the head of the meerschaum maiden popped high into the air and down into his lap.

In the dim lantern light Clem saw that theirs was no longer the only reflection in the paned glass of the Pogey House window. His nightly visitant had returned, standing over his shoulder like some horrible, headless sentinel.

Admiral Seabury mouthed the soundless oaths of the terror-stricken. Clem reached for the lantern in the eaves and cranked up the wick. Just as suddenly as she'd appeared, the Silent Woman faded away like a blurred and dissolving cloud.

The admiral rubbed his eyes in disbelief. He peered inside his pipebowl, then examined the contents of his tobacco pouch. Then, having failed to find a rational explanation in either one of these, handed both to Clem.

Clem took the things but offered no intimation that he had shared the admiral's vision. He knew the Silent Woman still hovered nearby, just beyond the lantern's light, the bright illumination only preventing her from sustaining a visible form. He also knew his lurking suspicion had just been confirmed into his most ardent fear. The Silent Woman wasn't haunting his fishhouse after all. She wasn't haunting his lobster boat, his wharf, or even the stoop of the Pogey House.

The Silent Woman was haunting him.

All was quiet on the long wharf that stretched out across the clamflats and into the bay. Drinkwater Flats, the muddy crescent of beach was called, and Drinkwater was also the name of the wharf. Clem shouldered his sailor's bag and made for the *Artful Dodger*, a ramshackle lugger berthed at the wharf's far end.

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The stars hung low over the distant horizon. Clem kept an eye on what few shadows and dark places there were on Drinkwater Wharf, determined at least to disarm his nightly visitant of her element of surprise if she was to appear. He'd realized too late the mistake he had made, telling his wife about his encounter at the Pogey House and the conclusion he'd drawn from it. She, for one, would brook no dalliance with odd and unnatural phenomena and wasted little time in packing his bag and putting him out.

Clem reached the boat without incident and crossed over to the deck. A sign on the cabin door read: DUNKY DRINKWATER, TOOTH CARPENTER. FOUR BITS: A PULLING. SIXTEEN BITS: THE WORKS. He rapped the door just below the sign, a domestic glow from a window of the two-story deckhouse telling him the owner-captain was home.

"Clem!" Dunky answered the door wearing a greasy apron, the peaceable haze of wood smoke and cooking mingling with the air of the open stern. "Come in, make yeself t' home. How's that new tooth treatin' ye?"

"Never mind that tooth," Clem said, dropping his bag to the floor. "I need a place t' stay fer th' night."

"Sure, sure," Dunky said. "Let's go down to th' galley. I got a spare bunk down there."

The two went below. Dunky gave a quick stir to the smoke-blackened crockpot on the wood range. "Have ye et supper yet, Clem? My beans are jus' about ready."

"Who can think o' beans at a time like this!" Clem shook out a moth-eaten blanket and spread it across the bunk. "I ain't slept solid in near a week!"

"Don't let that Silent Woman worry ye none, Clem," Dunky said, scooping beans onto a chipped plate. "I wrote a letter to Buck Stebbins about it. He'll know what t' do."

Clem pulled off his boots and flopped on the bunk. "Who's Buck Stebbins?"

"Ye don't know ol' Buck? He's Hornpout Stebbins' boy. Teaches down t' univers'ty. He's got wicked lots o' smarts."

"Kee-Riest A'mighty, I tol' ye not to say nawthin' to nobody, an' here ye go writin' letters to some univers'ty egghead. What's he study, anyhow?"

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"Th' minds o' birds," Dunky said, shoveling beans into his mouth.

"Th' minds o' what?" Clem asked, certain he'd misheard.

"Birds," Dunky repeated. "Works with parrots, as I recall. I guess he watches their activities, ye know, studies their manners an' all that."

"Bird behavior." Clem stared at Dunky in disbelief. "How in Hell's half-acre is that supposed to help me?"

Dunky thought for a moment. "I dunno, Clem. Hornpout says Buck's some sorta author'ty on th' matter."

"Hornpout ain't worth a fart in a gale o' wind, as far as I'm concerned," Clem grumbled.

"Wall, be that as it may," said Dunky. "I know Buck. An' if anybody can git a handle on those strange doin's in yer fishhouse, by gorry, it's him."

"He can save hisself th' trip. Those strange doin's ain't happenin' to my fishhouse," Clem said. "They're happenin' to me!"

Dunky shoveled his supper for a moment before the weight of Clem's words sank in. "Wha-at!" he cried, choking on his beans.

"Ayuh, yeou heard me right," Clem replied. A tingly feeling stole across his flesh, alarming him to something hypernormal in the atmosphere. He looked around the galley, pulling the blanket up to his chin. "Keep th' lights up," he whispered. "It holds her at bay."

"She's here?!" Dunky gasped, eyes darting at every shadow. He grabbed the other end of the blanket and pulled it to his chin. "I, I can't take th' sight of it agin, Clem. I can't...!"

"Howdya think I feel?" Clem cried. "She's bin scarin' th' livin' daylights out o' me ever' night this week!"

"Clem," Dunky wailed, "I like my livin' daylights right where they're at!" Without warning he jumped up, snatched a lantern from its holdfast, and bolted out the door.

"Where're ye goin'?" Clem shouted after him.

"Th' engine room," Dunky yelled back from the corridor. "We're goin' to find Buck Stebbins right now. He'll know what to do!"

Professor Buck Stebbins was the proverbial needle in the haystack. Clem and Dunky had arrived at the small coastal village of Meddybempsport just before sunrise and were rummaging around the campus of Banebridge

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University by first light, but the professor was nowhere to be found. They queried dozens of random students, all heading for classes and pressed for time, and when the folly of this was realized, they hunted around for a campus directory. This too proved futile, as the office assigned to Professor Stebbins was now abandoned. A nearby janitor suggested that the ornithology department might know where to find their missing bird behaviorist. It soon became apparent that none of the staff in that department had ever heard of Buck Stebbins. Finally a dean was located who, in a most exasperated manner, marked on a paper map of the campus where the misplaced professor could be found.

Clem and Dunky stood at the base of the high clock tower at the center of campus, looking down at the map.

"This is it, Clem," Dunky said. "Accordin' to th' dean, this is where we'll find Buck."

Clem looked up the imposing height of the clock tower. It was a fitting architectural monument to the collection of gothic monstrosities that comprised Banebridge's campus. According to the groundskeeper, it was nicknamed the Ivory Tower, not to signify any allusions to intellectual escapism, but due to the color of the deposits left on its black granite walls by the seagulls that soared about its apex.

Dunky yanked open the tall double doors. A blocky stairway twisted up the tower's interior.

"He must be at th' top," said Dunky. "Let's go."

"He ain't up there, ye damn stubborn fool," Clem said. "Let's git outta here. I ain't wastin' another minute lookin' fer this bird-brained professor o' yers."

Dunky bolted up the stairs. "Come on!"

"Yeou stubborn fool!" Clem shouted up the stairwell and took off after him.

The trip skyward seemed endless. Minutes later they topped the stairs, finding themselves at another door that opened into a vast cobwebbed room. Crates and boxes lay stacked within, nearly floor to ceiling, and one whole wall was dominated by the gears and inner workings of the immense clock.

Clem bent forward, leaning against his knees, trying to catch his breath. They had just mounted two dozen flights of steps, not for a

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professor's office, but for a deserted storage room. "Stubborn!" he shouted at the top of his lungs, glaring at Dunky.

"Stebbins, actually," came a voice from behind the wall of boxes, a whiskey-smooth, basso profundo voice that graveled at its edges. A man stepped into view and announced himself. "Professor Buckminster Stebbins."

Clem looked the man over. He was large in all his proportions, some would say fat, and he carried his excess weight where a woman carries hers, packed around the chest, hips, and ass. His great belly was pure male, though, and the entire effect was smoothed over by a well-tailored tweed jacket.

"Buck!" Dunky cried.

"Dunky, old friend!" Professor Stebbins said, smiling warmly. "How good to see you. I feared you were the dean's cronies, sent to oust me once again from my place of work."

Clem remembered Buckminster Stebbins now that he saw him in person. He was the spitting image of his father Hornpout: face like a sculpin, thick-lipped and jowly, with a slight underbite that formed tiny opercula at the corners of his mouth. They had attended school together as young boys, Clem recalled. He and the other bullies had bestowed upon Stebbins a childhood nickname, *Fishface*, or something like that, and had taunted him relentlessly, at least until the fourth grade, which was as far as Clem had gone.

But as much resemblance as Professor Stebbins's features bore to those of a fish, the similarity stopped at the eyes. His eyes were anything but fishlike. They practically radiated good humor and fierce intelligence.

"What brings you all the way to Banebridge?" Professor Stebbins asked. "We're a considerable jaunt from Clapboard."

"Wall, we ain't here to cordialize, 'xactly," Dunky replied. "Did ye git my letter?"

"Aye-yes. I received it by post not a day or so ago. A haunting, of a friend's fishhouse as I recall, by a spirit of some renown." The details seemed to snap into his mind suddenly. He turned to Clem, extending a friendly hand. "Clem Crowder, I'll hazard."

"Howdya-do," Clem replied. If the professor remembered him from his schoolboy days, he gave no indication of it.

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"Please, step into my office." Professor Stebbins led them around the wall of boxes to a dusty little corner of the clock tower room. Books were stacked on everything, the floor, the chair, the mahogany desk, and the only useful light came from several oversized candles.

"See Clem, I told ye he studied th' minds o' birds." Dunky indicated a diploma hanging on the wall. "Says right there...Parrot Psy-chology."

"That's *para*psychology, my good man," Professor Stebbins corrected. "The study of the psychological aspect of paranormal phenomena."

Clem turned to the professor. "Ye mean ye study the...supy-natural?"

"Among other things. My concentration is in amulets and talismans. Banebridge University, in fact, is recognized worldwide as the foremost authority on the study of paranormal and esoteric sciences. Or at least it was."

"Was?" Clem's mood took a definite upturn, now that the professor had been upgraded from a bird behaviorist to a college-educated supernaturalist. "What happened?"

"Our new campus leadership. With the backing of the deans, the president has set forth a bold new direction for the university. 'Fringe sciences' will no longer be the focus of our institution. Henceforth our curriculum will spotlight more 'respectable' fields of study, namely agricultural science and marine biology."

From a cracked window the professor looked out over the medieval-styled campus, as much at odds with the surrounding seaport town of Meddybempsport as ballerinas at a barn dance. "Banebridge was founded over two centuries ago for the study of arcane and mystical arts. It's commonly believed that its founders were witchcraft practitioners. At the height of the Puritan trials, hordes of beleaguered witches sought refuge in the backcountry hinterlands of Maine. An alliance of surviving covens formed here, on this very spot, and Banebridge University was born. Others believe the tradition reaches back even further, to a society of druids that traveled here with the seasonal Irish fisherman who plied these waters well before the coming of Columbus. Whatever the case, the beliefs and customs of its originators have survived in the values of this university for at least two hundred years or more. And now, a focus on agricultural science. Banebridge! A cow college!"

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Professor Stebbins took a deep breath and swallowed his pent-up ire. "I apologize for the diatribe. I tend to get emotional when it comes to this grand old institution. As you've noticed, no doubt, the dean has reassigned my former office to 'other business needs' and relegated me to the inner recesses of this clock tower. Cover your ears."

Clem thought he'd misunderstood that last part until he saw the professor pressing his hands against the sides of his head and Dunky quickly following suit. Clem clamped his own ears just as the great clock struck the hour. They patiently waited out ten bone-jarring gongs.

"We're safe for another hour," said Professor Stebbins when the crisis had passed. "Trust me, it's worse at noon."

Clem glanced over the musty volumes stacked on the professor's desk. The title of the uppermost book caught his eye. *To Hellenbach: The Tragic Life and Triumphant Death of a Downeast Captain.*

"A fascinating read," said the professor. "And quite relevant to your situation."

Clem cracked open the leatherbound tome and peered inside. The Table of Contents listed the infamous measures of Captain Hellenbach's life: his nine brides, his cursed schooner, his nemesis the Sea Crone, and not least of these was the Silent Woman. He leafed through the pages until he came upon a seventeenth-century woodcut depicting the too-familiar image of a headless colonial woman with child in arm.

"I pulled these volumes from the library the moment I'd finished your letter, Dunky. I'd planned to reference them in my reply. You'll both be glad to know that the *reasons* behind the Silent Woman's hauntings are fully accounted for in these pages, both the how and the why."

Clem looked up from the woodcut. "The why?"

"The why is self-evident," said the professor. "The Silent Woman was *deliberately* placed on Captain Hellenbach's schooner by his infamous archrival, the Sea Crone."

"Lordy Massy!" Clem exclaimed, quickly putting two and two together. "That means now I've been ensorcelled by th' Sea Crone!"

"Heavens no, heavens no," the professor assured him. "The key to your mystery haunting lies in *how* the Sea Crone accomplished such a feat."

Professor Stebbins grasped the monocle that dangled from around his

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neck and wedged it into the hollow of his eye. He flipped the page and pointed to a lithograph of what appeared to be an irregular hunk of ivory with odd markings carved across its surface. "She achieved her objective with this."

Clem and Dunky stared at the lithograph and then at each other.

"I can see from your expressions that you recognize this scrimshaw piece. I suspected you might."

"What is it?"

"It is known as a spectral fetlock. Through the means of black art, the Sea Crone bound the Silent Woman to this scrimshaw object, then secreted it aboard Hellenbach's schooner. No one was the wiser. And thus the haunting began." The professor closed the book and let the monocle slip from his eye. "Now I presume you have encountered this fetlock yourself?"

Clem nodded. "In the waters off Leighton's Point. It was caught in the lathes of my lobster trap."

"Extra-ordinary," said Professor Stebbins, nearly breaking the word in two. "Leighton's Point. The very spot where Hellenbach's schooner was submerged. Our little mystery is nearly solved."

"I told ye he's got wicked lots o' smarts," said Dunky, nudging Clem with an elbow.

Professor Stebbins waved off the compliment. "Where is the fetlock now?"

"Gave it to Dunky, as I recall," Clem replied. "He said he knew a feller what might take an interest in it."

"That feller was yeou, Buck," Dunky said. "I'm awful sorry, I never did git aroun' to bringin' it to ye."

"Quite all right," said the professor. "Do you have it now?"

"Ayuh. Ever since Clem give it to me, when, last Spring?"

Professor Stebbins reared back in embellished astonishment. "Am I to understand that the fetlock has been in your possession, Dunky, for approximately half the year without a single sighting of the Silent Woman? And now, within a week, she has taken up residence in Clem Crowder's fishhouse?"

Dunky and Clem exchanged looks. "Wall, things have changed a dite since I wrote that letter, Buck. As it turns out, she ain't took up in Clem's fishhouse after all...."

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"She hasn't?" Professor Stebbins asked, a disquieting edge to his voice.

"Nawp," said Clem. "She's took up with me."

"Curious!" From his inner coat pocket Professor Stebbins removed a sardine can, of all things, inserted the key at the lip and slowly, methodically, peeled back the lid. "Most curious. It seems our little supernatural mystery can't be clapped in a can and salted down so easily. We must rethink this situation entirely...sardine?" he offered, holding forth the can. "I find they help sally the concentration."

Clem declined, though it did remind him that Fish-*breath* was the schoolboy nickname they'd given Buck Stebbins those many years ago.

"The question remains," the professor said around a mouthful of sardine, "why has the Silent Woman returned now, at this particular point in time?"

"An' why'd she come about to possess me?" Clem added.

"Not possessed, Clem," Professor Stebbins said. "Heavens no. Possession is another kettle of fish entirely. To use the correct terminology, it seems the Silent Woman has *infested* you."

Clem grimaced, liking the sound of one just as much as the other. "By gorry I'd like t' ask her why she's *infested* me, then."

"Ask her?" Professor Stebbins said, nearly choking on his final sardine. "Are you suggesting we attempt to contact the Silent Woman directly?" A brilliant gleam lit his eyes. "An excellent idea, Clem! For that, of course, we'll need to secure a medium."

Dunky looked just as perplexed as Clem. "A medium what?"

"Someone who can communicate with the spirits of the dead," the professor clarified offhandedly. "And I know just the person. Ms. Bevilacqua?"

To Clem's surprise, a thin-faced woman poked her head out from around an opposing wall of boxes. "Yes, professor?"

"My overcoat, please."

The woman stepped around the corner, trading off an overcoat for the emptied sardine can.

"Thank you, Ms. Bevilacqua. I'll be out for the remains of the day." Professor Stebbins herded Clem and Dunky toward the door. "I'll track down Madame Zorla and arrange for her to assist us as acting medium in

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a communication attempt this evening. She is professor emeritus of spiritualism here at Banebridge, and a dear old friend. If the two of you would, return to your ship and make all necessary preparations for a séance. And one more thing, Ms. Bevilacqua," he said over his shoulder. "If the dean should inquire as to my whereabouts, tell him...." He halted in the doorway, contemplating a suitable response. "Tell him I'm ghost-hunting."

CLEM STARED at the year's tide tables hanging well-thumbed upon the cabin wall. Several hours had passed since he and Dunky had completed their preparations for the séance — a task they interpreted as the embellishment of a table with four chairs — and they had spent the remainder of the afternoon in the two-story deckhouse awaiting the professor.

When Professor Stebbins finally arrived he was taken aloft to the bridge, where he inspected the arrangements they had made. The room was sparse — consisting of little more than the wheel, the table and chairs, and an athwartship bunk seemingly too small for comfort — but otherwise the professor deemed the provisions suitable for their needs.

"Madame Zorla should arrive shortly," Professor Stebbins said. He positioned his huge rear over the bunk as if meaning to sit, then, noting its size, apparently thought better of it. "She'll need our complete cooperation if our attempts to contact the Silent Woman are to succeed at all."

Dunky nodded in willingness. "Do ye think she'll want that scrimshaw piece to help commence th' spirit-talkin'?"

"The spectral fetlock?" Professor Stebbins asked. "Oh my, is it here?"

"Ayuh." Dunky reached for a compartment drawer, pulled it free and upended it over the tabletop. Nuggets of ivory spilled everywhere.

"Egad, what chaos." The professor looked over the pile of scrimshaw, unable to discern which one was the fetlock. Clem spotted it immediately and plucked it out of the heap.

"Ah, there it is." Professor Stebbins stared at the fetlock in Clem's hand, examining it from several angles. "It's superlative. It's inimitable.

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It's..." He wedged the monocle into the hollow of his eye and leaned in close. "...it's damaged."

Clem examined the scrimshaw closely himself. It was as he remembered it, roughly pyramidal in shape, not unlike a gumdrop, only now the summit was completely gouged off, leaving a bare, concave scar.

"Was it always like this?" asked the professor.

"Gawd, I'm awful sorry 'bout that," Dunky blurted out before Clem could answer. "Admir'l Seabury needed a new rook fer his chessboard, so I carved him one out o' that — "

"Out o' this piece o' scrimshaw!" Clem finished, shaking the fetlock in his fist. "Of all th' scrap ivory ye got lyin' around here, yeou had to use *this* one fer — "

"I'm afraid it's worse than that," interrupted Professor Stebbins. He'd brought the Hellenbach book with him from his clock tower office and opened it now, pointing to the lithograph of the fetlock. "Those markings etched across the scrimshaw's surface are runic characters. Sort of a mystical alphabet, if you will. Notice how they spiral to the apex. It is this apex rune, the Key Rune, that brings it all together."

Clem compared the lithograph to the fetlock: sure enough, the Key Rune was now gone.

"Energy is channeled through these secondary runes to the Key Rune," the professor explained, tracing his finger over the scrimshaw. "And at this point alone, the key position, was the Silent Woman bound to the fetlock."

"Ye must've released her when ye chipped off that Key Rune," Clem snarled at Dunky.

"Not certain," said the professor, shaking his head. "Not certain at all. If the Silent Woman was in fact released, why is she bound once again, and why to you, Clem, of all people? Why not Dunky? Why not Admiral Seabury, for that matter? There's still a piece to this puzzle we're missing."

A rap on the bridge door brought the discussion to an abrupt close. Professor Stebbins pocketed the fetlock while Dunky cracked open the door. Clem peered over his shoulder and was startled to see no one was there! Then he looked down. Standing waist-high to him was a stout, broad-faced woman who bore an unusual resemblance to a pampered toy

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dog, the kind of yapping little ankle-biter he'd seen the summer complaints cradling in their arms during tourist season.

"Gosh all hemlock, Buck," Dunky said. "We asked fer a medium, an' they sent over an extry-small."

"That's Madame Zorla!" Professor Stebbins cried. "Let her in, Dunky, let her in."

"Is that you in there, Doctor Stebbins?" Madame Zorla called in a high helium-voice. "I thought I sensed your presence."

Dunky stepped aside, allowing Madame Zorla to enter the bridge. Her short legs carried her quickly through the door in a confused blur of costume jewelry and cosmetic kitsch.

"I sense another," said Madame Zorla, stirring the air with her hand. "A wretched soul, long imprisoned, whose barren existence has endured several lifetimes of pain and suffering...."

"That would be Clem," said Dunky.

"*That* would be the Silent Woman," corrected Professor Stebbins.

"Quickly, we must help this poor woman-child," said Madame Zorla, making for the table without a moment to lose. "Everyone gather around."

The foursome immediately took their seats. Madame Zorla instructed them to lay their hands flat upon the tabletop so their outstretched fingers formed an unbroken human circle. After several deep breaths Madame Zorla tipped her head back and let out a lengthy moan.

"Clem," Dunky whispered. "I think yer steppin' on her foot."

"I'll need complete silence," said Madame Zorla, eyes fluttering and head lolling. "I'm about to make contact...."

Suddenly Madame Zorla jerked back, gasping like a fish above water. When she spoke again it was in a voice quite unlike her own. "I can breathe! At long last I can breathe...and I can speak...I am silent no more!"

"My gorry!" Clem gasped. "Who are ye?"

"Ben...Benevolence," replied Madame Zorla. "My name is Benevolence Dunham."

"The Silent Woman," Professor Stebbins whispered to Clem. "Most scholars believe she has been positively identified in the historical record. Although her name was lost to us — until this very moment, that is — her description is clearly documented in the journal of Sir Raleigh Peatybog."

"Sir who?" asked Clem.

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"Raleigh Peatybog," repeated the professor. "Founder of one of our earliest colonies."

"I need complete silence," Madame Zorla reminded them in her own voice, and then in the other, "How long, tell me, how long has it been since last I spoke?"

Professor Stebbins cleared his throat. "The Peatybog expedition made landfall on the coast of Maine in 1608. Presumably your voice was last utilized in or around that year."

Dunky whistled. "Never knowed a woman could keep from talkin' fer so long...."

"I must have silence!" demanded Madame Zorla. Her head jerked back and in the other voice said, "The...expedition...My God, the colony is under attack! The Indians! Why, why do they attack?!"

Professor Stebbins cleared his throat again. "Eager to establish good relations with their new neighbors, Sir Raleigh arranged a powwow with the local Indian tribe. The colonists showered all manner of gifts upon their newfound native friends: brass kettles, felt hats, glass beads...and cheese."

Clem and Dunky looked askance at him, and even Madame Zorla opened one eye. "Cheese?" she asked in her own voice.

"Indeed. The Indians had never seen anything quite like it. Sir Raleigh made a grand show of presenting the chieftain with a finely aged block of cheddar. Little did anyone know that the chieftain had a dairy intolerance. He found cheese quite indigestible, to put it mildly."

"And?" pressed Madame Zorla.

"Mistaking the well-meaning gift as an attempt to poison their chieftain, the Indians took to the warpath. The colonists never saw it coming. Sir Raleigh greeted the advancing braves with open arms, only to have his sword drawn from its scabbard...," Professor Stebbins rose from the table to pantomime the action, "and the hilt of it crashed against his temple!"

"Don't break the connection!" snapped Madame Zorla. Professor Stebbins immediately sat back down and reestablished his hands in the circle.

Madame Zorla's eyes fluttered again. Tears began to stream down her cheeks. "Help...please help," she said in the other voice. "My child...I

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must protect my child...that Indian, a sword...No, keep away from me!" Madame Zorla's shrill scream was cut short by a sickening gurgle.

Professor Stebbins took a deep, solemn breath. "When Sir Raleigh regained consciousness from his blow several hours later, he found the fledgling colony had been razed to the ground. His descriptions of the massacre are quite vivid. One victim in particular, a young maiden, had had her head cleanly separated from the neck, as if by a razor-sharp blade. Sir Raleigh instantly knew it must have been the work of his own pilfered sword."

"That young maiden," Clem spoke softly. "Th' Silent Woman?"

The professor gave a somber nod. "So recently had she been murdered, that her infant still suckled at her unlaced bodice, its fair young cheeks dotted with flecks of milk and blood. Months later, a supply ship discovered the carnage at the Peatybog Colony. What remained of poor Sir Raleigh was hanging in a noose from the rafters of his log cabin. The story I have just related to you was fully accounted for in Raleigh's journal, up to the point when he took his own life, naturally."

Dunky gulped. "An' th' baby?"

Professor Stebbins hoisted his eyebrows, as if the question posed had never occurred to him before. "Presumably starved to death at the breast of its departed mother."

"Shut...up...," Madame Zorla hissed. "Before contact is lost altogether...."

"Please continue, by all means," Professor Stebbins said. "We mustn't lose contact with her now. It's imperative we establish her later relationship with the Sea Crone...."

"The crone! The witch!" cried Madame Zorla in the otherworldly voice at the mention of the Sea Crone. "Keep her away...what is she doing, what has she done to me...?"

"She has bound you," Professor Stebbins spoke firmly, holding forth the spectral fetlock. "To this! Benevolence Dunham, listen closely, you'll find what I'm about to say difficult to believe. You are a disembodied revenant roaming the world of the living, longing to resolve your earthly sorrows but unable to do so on your own. In short, you are a typical ghost, and as such, almost certainly unaware of your own condition. The Sea Crone found you many, many years ago, though nearly a century-and-a-half after the event of your murder, and bound you to this spectral fetlock

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as an unwitting tool in her own personal vendetta. But now, for reasons unknown, you are tied to another, and we are here to break those binds and guide you on your final journey toward the Light. In order to do that, you must tell us where your remains are buried...."

Clem threw a questioning glance across the table at Dunky. "Her remains?"

"We must locate her grave," the professor hissed under his breath, more to himself than in answer to Clem. He squared off in front of Madame Zorla, his face hard and serious. "If we are to help you, you must guide us to your final resting place...."

The color drained from Madame Zorla's face. Her lips struggled to move. An odd choking sound emanated from deep in her throat.

"Benevolence Dunham," the professor said in a rising, authoritative voice. He leaned over the table and seized Madame Zorla by the shoulders. "Benevolence Dunham, where is your grave!"

Madame Zorla peeled her lips wide, filling the air with a cruel cackle that crawled across the skin and set hairs on end. It was the unmistakable, unjoyous sound of witch-laughter.

The temperature in the room dropped instantly. A wind from nowhere lashed the kerosene lamps to half-light. The Silent Woman materialized in an intense, eerie glow. Even without a head to convey expression it was clear she was frantic. She swiped one arm wildly about, clutching her infant tightly to her bodice with the other.

"Don't let her touch you!" shouted Professor Stebbins. The warning needed no repeating. Clem and Dunky tumbled from their chairs and piled into a corner of the bridge. Only Madame Zorla remained at the table, immobilized in her trance-state. Professor Stebbins hauled her from her seat and fell back to the corner with the others.

The Silent Woman advanced, step by step. Everyone pressed against the wall and each other, hideously cornered with no clear avenue of escape. Her fingertips just inches from brushing across their terrified faces, the Silent Woman suddenly swung back the other way, disoriented and confused. At last she seemed to lose strength and gradually faded from sight.

"Oh my gorries," Dunky sobbed. "Th' sight of it agin!"

"As my wife says," Clem whimpered softly, "it curdles th' blood."

"In some cases, quite literally," Professor Stebbins added, venturing

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from the corner, cautiously at first. "The touch of an apparition has been shown to slightly congeal the blood in the area of contact...thickening it, or, in essence, *curdling* it. The circulatory system can fail under the strain of such coagulated blood, causing the heart to seize — giving the victim the appearance of one who has died 'by fright,' as they say."

Clem shuddered at the thought of how often the Silent Woman had nearly brushed against him.

"My friends, I'm afraid we may have reached an impasse," said Professor Stebbins, gaining confidence that the apparition was truly gone for the time being. "If history is any guide, the expulsion of the Silent Woman may be out of the question. Exorcisms, séances, mediumships, these sorts of things were all tried back in Hellenbach's day. I should have realized it earlier. The Sea Crone clearly safeguarded the fetlock against such standard practices. Our bag of tricks hasn't changed much over the years, and I fear these techniques won't work any better now than they did then." The professor sighed. "If only we'd learned the location of her final resting place."

"I ain't real clear on why we want t' know that," said Clem.

Professor Stebbins steepled his fingers under his chin, pacing back and forth across the confined space of the bridge. "Ghosts almost universally dwell in the last spot they occupied on earth, either their place of death or place of burial. It stands to reason that the Silent Woman occupied either one of these places when the Sea Crone 'pressed her into service,' so to speak."

"So?"

"So, in terms of energy, this is where the Silent Woman belongs. It is her home, her haunt. If she can be unfettered from you at all, Clem, it would be there."

"And where is that?"

At this the professor shook his head. "Somewhere in or near the old Peatybog colony, one must presume. But progressing from generalities to particulars would likely require nothing short of testimony from the Sea Crone herself."

A pained, squeaky moan drew everyone's attention back to the corner. Madame Zorla was staggering to her feet, only now recovering from the violent breaking of her trance.

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"Madame Zorla! Forgive me, I nearly forgot...." Professor Stebbins reached for her, steadying her arm. As he did so the spectral fetlock spilled from his coat pocket.

Madame Zorla stared at the rune-covered scrimshaw lying on the floor. "Is that...?"

"Eh? Aye-yes, the spectral fetlock. I meant to show it to you earlier," the professor said, scooping it up from the floor.

"You had it here, in your possession? I had no idea." Madame Zorla eyed the fetlock reverentially, to Clem it seemed almost *hungrily*. "A genuine artifact of the Sea Crone's. How remarkable...and powerful...."

"And, needless to say, dangerous in the wrong hands." Professor Stebbins tucked the fetlock back into his coat pocket. "Madame Zorla, I'm afraid our séance was a bust. Obviously the Sea Crone took great measure in preventing the Silent Woman from ever revealing the location of her grave. I personally see no other means of learning its whereabouts...unless by chance the Sea Crone kept some sort of written record of it." He broke into a mirthless smile. "Anyone know where we can find her diary?"

"Greasy Frog Light," Madame Zorla answered, her eyes lingering on the coat pocket where Stebbins had secured the fetlock.

"I beg your pardon?"

"Her diary," repeated Madame Zorla. "It's at Greasy Frog."

"You are referring to Greasy Frog, the lighthouse?"

Clem balked at the mere mention of Greasy Frog, an involuntary gut reaction not so much against the lighthouse itself, but for her keeper, an intimidating man of some wealth and privilege known mainly by the singular name of Mesmeron. He had a last name as well, of course, but no one ever used it anymore — least of all the Stoddards, who had ceased to claim their dispossessed relation many years ago. It wasn't Mesmeron's vaunting pomposity they spurned — for that was simply part and parcel of being a Stoddard — but rather his flagrant desire for power, his appetent need to exercise authority over affairs of state or institution, not just by any means possible, but by any means even barely *conceivable*.

Which, Clem knew, included some dodgy practices indeed. He'd had the misfortune of seeing Mesmeron's private library once before. Even to a layman it was clearly a most impressive collection, dedicated to occultism in all its various forms. A quick survey of titles had revealed a

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strong devotion to the works of the Sea Crone, though admittedly he'd not laid eyes on anything like her diary. If it existed at all, though, he knew it would be there.

"Don't suspect Mesmeron's got that one in his book-pantry," Clem lied, thinking he might prefer the Silent Woman's nightly visitations to a single encounter with the lighthouse keeper.

"Mesmeron. Mesmeron," Professor Stebbins repeated to himself. "As I recall, he attempted to instigate a correspondence with myself several years ago. I did not particularly take to him, owing to the tone of his letter, so did not pursue the acquaintance. He was a political enthusiast and collector of occult antiquities, if memory serves."

"Still is," said Madame Zorla. "And it so happens he's seeking a professional examination of his latest acquisition, an alleged talisman."

"A talisman?" Professor Stebbins tugged at the lapels of his tweed coat.

"Your field of expertise," Madame Zorla needlessly reminded him. "I received a written invitation to examine the artifact myself, but a prior engagement forced me to decline the offer. Perhaps you could go in my stead? A qualitative analysis might just fill Mesmeron with gratitude enough to allow you a look at the diary."

"A talisman." Professor Stebbins beamed, deepening the tiny opercula at the corners of his mouth. For no explicable reason he fixed his monocle in place and faced the window of the bridge, as if capable of looking upon the lighthouse from so many leagues distance. "I think it is time we paid a visit to our estranged colleague-in-interest Mesmeron, master and keeper of Greasy Frog Light."

THE *ARTFUL DODGER* plowed headlong into the cresting waves, her diesel hammering the air like an oily telltale heart. Clem felt his own heart keeping time with it. What had struck him as an unfavorable course of action the night before now seemed, under the chill shadow of the fast approaching Greasy Frog Lighthouse, like an exercise in lunacy. Mesmeron was renowned for his disdain toward callers, especially the uninvited variety. Clem seriously doubted they'd make it past the front door.

Professor Stebbins didn't share in his skepticism, however. He claimed

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to have "just the trick," and insisted they commence on their voyage by daybreak.

The *Artful Dodger* chugged to a stop and Clem set the mooring lines. The tall spire of Greasy Frog greeted them overhead like an obscene gesture. On this island rock, one soon learned that Mesmeron's word was law. A twenty-year stint as keeper had invested him with absolute independent power over others — at least within his limited realm of influence, which consisted exclusively of the Steptoe Family. The Steptoes had attended the Stoddards since time immemorial, and Mesmeron had inherited his own cadre of domestic servantry from this sizable and fecund stock. It was said that the exact number of Steptoes in attendance at Greasy Frog was unknown, even to Mesmeron himself.

Dunky and Professor Stebbins disembarked the old lugger, followed closely by Clem, who fully expected a Steptoe or two would accost them well before they could reach the lighthouse on the hill. But evidently their approach over sea had gone unnoticed. For all the activity around them, they might just as well have landed on a deserted island.

Mounting the hilltop, Clem looked down the opposite slope and found their missing commotion. A dozen or so misshaped figures, all dressed in black sackcloth, bustled about the waterfront, too preoccupied with whatever they were doing to notice the three trespassers on the hill. The Steptoes, as a family, were unmistakable in appearance, their mountainous hunched backs identifying them upon sight, even from a distance.

Beyond them, treading the water, Clem could just make out an incoming craft. To him it looked to be, of all things, an oversized birchbark canoe, the kind used for sea voyaging by the Indians in days of yore. Canoe or no, it was definitely manpowered, and the steady stroke of the paddler sliced its course through the whitecaps like an arrow. He found himself wishing for his spyglass so he could take a closer look.

The three men continued on, reaching the door without incident. "Ah, a capricorn," Professor Stebbins said, noting the brass fish-goat that served as the lighthouse's doorknocker. He grasped the tail and gave it a swift pounding.

The door swung open immediately. "Enter!" said the hunchback who

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answered, grandly flourishing an arm that didn't seem quite short enough to prevent his knuckles from dragging the ground. "The masster hass been expecting you...."

Even had Clem been on a first-name basis with the Steptoes, which he was not, he doubted sincerely his ability to discriminate one family member from another. The doorman leered at them from the corners of his lolling, protuberant eyes — which just happened to be the line of sight and, having determined the party was *not* the one his master was expecting, proceeded to shove the door shut.

"Hold on, my stout fellow!" cried Professor Stebbins, slamming an adipose hip against the door. Even with his substantial girth in his favor, he struggled to keep it from closing all the way. "Your master...has requested...an audience...with me...."

Professor Stebbins produced a letter from his coat pocket and slid it through the crack in the doorway. Nearly a minute passed, during which the doorman was presumably reading the letter, for in the end he edged the door open and gestured them inside.

"Come along, step lively," he said. They followed him down the long front hallway, its walls adorned with old family portraits painted in oil. Clem glanced up, unsettled by the cavalcade of prosperous ancestors under dimming glass. Generations of Stoddards seemed to be looking down on him, as they certainly would have in life. Shearjashub Stoddard, one nameplate read, a shipping magnate whose long face was all peaks and valleys. At his feet in the painting was another man, clearly a servant, and Clem was surprised to find that the nameplate also identified him as one Crepshaw Steptoe.

In fact, Clem soon realized, every Stoddard portrait included a servile Steptoe counterpart. Here was Recompense Stoddard, an old granddame with her handmaiden, Grisella Steptoe. Next was Jehosaphat Stoddard and Old Crookback, hopefully a nickname. The procession went on and on. Clem couldn't help but notice that the Steptoes of yesterday were indistinguishable from those of today: splay-eyed and platterfaced, with massive humped backs. The Stoddards were all of a kind as well, grim-visaged and lean, conceptual paradigms of the Puritan killjoys that comprised every New Englander's family tree.

Professor Stebbins came to a stop, gazing up at one of the portraits as

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if fascinated by it in particular. Clem and Dunky positioned themselves beside him.

"Judge Increase Stoddard," the professor said, indicating the stern man in the portrait. "The infamous Puritan Witch-Inquisitor."

"An' Cap'n Esau Steptoe," Dunky read aloud from the nameplate.

"Both progenitors of their family lines in America," the professor informed them. "A rumor once circulated that the Stoddards, desirous of the perfect servant, resolved to bring forth such a stock through selective breeding. These ancestral Stoddard patricians oversaw the discriminating propagation of their servantry, the Steptoes, and over several generations furthered the proliferation of certain deferential traits. If there is any truth to the matter at all, the modern day Steptoe is the hereditary outcome of this legacy, bred to yield willingly to commands and eagerly submit to authority."

The doorman cleared his throat, glaring at them with his huge mushroom eyes.

"Sorry," said Professor Stebbins, his face reddening slightly. "Just admiring the portraits of your incestors...ah, that is, your *ancestors*."

The doorman swung his long arm, flagging them to continue down the hallway. "Step lively!"

The three men followed close on the heels of the lumbering hunchback. Drawing nearer the library, the rise and fall of Mesmeron's distinctive oratorical voice echoed in the distance: "...an instrument, to marshal the unseen powers of the dark..." — Clem heard him say — "...an implement to raise the souls of the dead, harness them, bend them to a mortal will...."

*A speech*, Clem reasoned, which caused him to speculate on who its target audience might be. According to Madame Zorla, Mesmeron had been seeking an expert to examine his new artifact for quite some time: it sounded like he'd assembled a whole *panel* of experts, and was addressing them now.

"...a talismanic utensil to harbor the invisible forces, drive them to carry out my bidding...." Mesmeron's voice grew louder, more resonant. Clem and the others came to a standstill in the library doorway.

Mesmeron stood within, turned away from them so he faced a tall window overlooking the sea. Otherwise the room was unoccupied.

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"If indeed my latest acquisition can be used to enlist the aid of those who have shed their mortal coils," Mesmeron waxed on to himself, "I will reach beyond the course and law of nature, surpassing even the wildest ambitions of my occultist predecessors, and by the intrusion of supernormal agency wrest control of the body politic," he clutched his fingers around a handful of air, "and at long last impose my dominion over the civil government of — !"

"Masster!" shouted the doorman, cringing at the forcefulness of his own voice. "You're soliloquizing again."

Mersmeron jerked his head in profile, revealing a face that could have been the side view of any one of the Stoddard portraits in the hallway. Annoyance at the intrusion was clearly chiseled into its angular outline. A taut moment later he gave a quick nod of concession.

"And masster," the doorman continued. "You have a gentleman caller."

Mesmeron spun around fully this time, astonished, either from the announcement of an unsolicited visitor or simply from the vague homosexual undertones of referring to one as a "gentleman caller."

"A Doctor Stebbins to see you," said the doorman, indicating the professor. He had apparently deemed Clem and Dunky beneath even a cursory introduction, which was likely based on the probability that his master wouldn't acknowledge them anyway.

Mesmeron stepped forward, raising himself to full height in order to look down on the professor along the length of his aquiline nose. "Buckminster Stebbins, Ph.D., of Banebridge University, professor of supernatural studies with a specialization in amulets, talismans, charms, and fetishes?"

"Just so," said the professor. He stepped forward and extended a hand in greeting. "And you without question are Mesmeron, former Selectman and Principal Proprietary of Clapboard Island, current administrator and keeper of Greasy Frog lighthouse. The pleasure is all mine."

"So it is," Mesmeron said, ignoring the offered hand. "I suggest you vacate the premises on your own volition, else suffer the indignity of being forcibly removed."

"Masster?" cried the doorman. "I don't understand. This letter, an invitation...."

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"Postmarked seven years ago!" Mesmeron bellowed, snatching the letter from the doorman's hand. He closed in on Professor Stebbins, mere inches from his face. "Couldn't work a reply into your demanding schedule, Doctor?"

The professor raised his eyebrows in exaggerated bewilderment. "You'd asked me to provide you with historical precedents for the utilization of supernatural coercion in affairs of state. I hardly knew how to respond."

"With promptness, for starters," snapped Mesmeron. "And for future reference, I'll have you — "

"Masster — ?" the doorman interjected tentatively. "Your appointee has arrived."

Two more Steptoes entered the room, accompanied by a man so large he filled the doorframe. He was unmistakably an American Indian, and one who claimed his native heritage to its fullest degree. He was dressed in the old Algonquian ways, in buckskin leggings and moccasins, and even sported a ceremonial feather bonnet, a cultural element of the Plains Indians that in recent years had been adopted by the native peoples as a whole. His braided hair was more salt than pepper, and his face was weathered like a block of ironstone after eons in the rain.

This, then, was the expert Mesmeron had secured. Clem realized now it had indeed been a canoe he'd spotted earlier on the waterfront.

"Ah. Chief Louie Poolaw," said Mesmeron, announcing the man himself.

"Mesmeron," Chief Louie replied in a voice pitched so low it seemed to percolate from the bowels of the earth. "Let's get this over with."

"You will be fully compensated in your role as consultant, I assure you," Mesmeron replied, as if money was always the only concern. He unfurled a sheet of fabric lying on the table, and from it drew forth an old Indian war club, a traditional Abnaki weapon from centuries long past. Its lethal extremity was replete with deadly prongs and a heavy round knob. "My latest acquisition will be of some interest to you. I'd like your impressions of it."

The chief accepted the proffered weapon. Clem watched as he slowly turned it in his hands. On the backside was carved in great detail the face of an Indian Brave. Its expression was horrendous: eyes glut with insanity,

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mouth full open in battle scream, with features so war-scarred and ravaged that the teeth were visible through a gaping hole in one cheek. Clem recoiled at the awful sight of it.

"Hmmmm. Micmac Moe," rumbled Chief Louie, staring hard at the graven face.

Dunky leaned in for a closer look. "Micmac who?"

"Mohequawket," said Chief Louie. "Of the Micmac tribe. Known in his day as Micmac Moe."

"His day, Dunky, was the early eighteenth century," Professor Stebbins elaborated. "A time when the English colonies resorted to the inhuman policy of offering a flat bounty for every Indian scalp taken. Man, woman, or child."

"Micmac Moe took the policy as his own," said Chief Louie. "It is said his personal collection of Yankee scalps numbered in the hundreds."

"Yes, yes, good for him," said Mesmeron. He ran his finger along the club, pointing out a string of symbols running the length of the handle. "See here, these Micmac hieroglyphs...are they talismanic in nature?"

"A talisman?" Chief Louie rolled the word like thunder. "I am no medicine man. If you had indicated that your interest was in the ways of magic, I would have asked Wounded Liver to accompany me."

"Ah, Wounded Liver, a very powerful shaman," Professor Stebbins chimed in. "We've worked together on a great number of difficult hauntings, even an exorcism or two. He has a remarkable way with strong spirits."

"More kinds than one, I suspect," said Mesmeron, yanking the club from Chief Louie's hands and offering it to Professor Stebbins. "Perhaps your intrusion was a fortuitous one after all, doctor. I'm curious to hear the learned opinion of a recognized authority in the field."

Professor Stebbins set his monocle in place and gave the club a measured once-over. "A talisman? At first blush, I'd say no. The Micmacs were the only North American tribe known to have a written language, and I see no indication that these hieroglyphs meant anything other than their face value. Typically, a true talisman would look something like this." The professor reached into his coat pocket and produced the spectral fetlock.

Mesmeron's reaction was instantaneous. His face jerked and twitched uncontrollably, torn between an expression of spastic delight and awe.

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"I take it you recognize the handiwork of the Sea Crone," the professor said.

"Oh indeed, yes indeed...." Mesmeron smiled like an egg-sucking snake in a henhouse. "A genuine spectral fetlock, rendered by the most powerful rune-mistress to have ever walked the earth. It far surpasses anything in my collection. I insist upon purchasing it from you, of course."

"Oh, it's not for sale," Professor Stebbins said.

"Pity." Mesmeron worked his fingers reflexively, as if he contemplated snatching the scrimshaw from the professor's hand and making a run for it. "If I could have loan of the fetlock, perhaps, yes perhaps it could be duplicated...."

"Unlikely in the extreme," Professor Stebbins said. "I doubt any living soul has the necessary skill and knowledge to exact such a feat. You of all people know the Sea Crone stood in a class of her own."

"Tell me, professor," Mesmeron hissed in a conspiratorial whisper, "could such an object be exploited as a political tool?"

"I beg your pardon?"

"Can you envision a way that the fetlock could be used to govern the masses?"

"To govern?" Professor Stebbins knitted his eyebrows. "In a limited manner, I suppose. By intimidation through fear, at least on a small scale, perhaps."

"What about a larger political entity," Mesmeron pressed him. "Say, the Commonwealth of Massachusetts?"

The professor pursed his lips. "In no way conceivable by me," he answered. "But then, I've given it no previous thought."

Mesmeron abandoned his line of questioning with a flippant sneer, his inherent smugness reinforced once again by another's lack of vision.

"Besides," Professor Stebbins continued, "the fetlock is devoid of any ghostly tenants at the moment. For reasons unknown to us, the Silent Woman has now infested Clem Crowder instead. Which leads me to the true purpose of our visit — "

"You want to locate her grave," Mesmeron finished his thought.

"Precisely. Somewhere in your vast collection we hope to uncover a clue to its whereabouts."

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"Allow me to save you the trouble." Mesmeron reached for a drawstring dangling along the wall and unfurled a large map of Maine. "Her grave is here."

"Oh my." Professor Stebbins adjusted his monocle and stared at the spot where Mesmeron was tapping his finger. "Not exactly cheek by jowl with the old Peatybog Colony."

Clem examined the map as well. The professor was right: the place indicated by Mesmeron was much farther down the coast than the original colony site, and somewhat inland.

"The supply ship that discovered the carnage at the Peatybog expedition feared a second attack by the savages," Mesmeron explained. "They gathered the bodies and transported them to a safer environment for burial."

"Hmmmm," Chief Louie rumbled, leaning in. Mesmeron tugged the drawstring, sending the map whirling back to its rolled position before the chief could take a closer look.

"Let us settle the account of your services, shall we," Mesmeron said, turning quickly on the chief. He snapped his fingers for a Steptoe to come forward with money. "We don't carry wampum, I'm afraid."

"Cash will do nicely," Chief Louie replied. One of the Steptoes laid several bills in his hand. The chief's fingers beckoned. "We've come a long way since Manhattan."

At a nod from his master the Steptoe handed over several more bills.

"Please escort the chief to his watercraft," Mesmeron said, "and prepare the spare bedchambers for our guests. We'll leave on the morrow, first thing."

Clem, Dunky, and Professor Stebbins looked at one another. "We?"

"Naturally," Mesmeron replied. "I alone can guide you to the precise location of the Silent Woman's grave. There are no objections, I presume?"

Mesmeron stared directly at Clem while asking this. For the first time since their arrival Clem felt as though the lighthouse keeper might actually be aware of his presence. It was not a good feeling. He pulled his hat from his head and worked it nervously in his hands, wracking his brain for an objection, any objection, no matter how implausible, that

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would keep Mesmeron from joining them on this, the final leg of their journey.

Clem sighed. Try as he might, no objections came readily to mind.

IT WAS ANOTHER sleepless night for Clem. He lay awake in the guest bedroom at Greasy Frog Light, listening to the waves crashing against the shore outside as he gently smoked the meerschaum pipe given to him by Admiral Seabury, cracked though it was. He reminisced about better days doing better things.

"When's that blasted ghost going to show?" Mesmeron said. He was seated in a chair beside Clem's bed, his naturally thin patience wearing progressively threadbare.

"She materializes to no timetable that I'm aware of," Professor Stebbins replied from his seat on the other side of Clem's bed. He was engrossed in a tome he'd selected from Mesmeron's library, something about effectively utilizing amulets, as near as Clem could tell from the cover. Apparently the professor's understanding of the subject differed greatly from the author's, judging by his continual snorts of derision.

Clem fluffed a pillow and placed it under his head. The two men on either side of him were determined to witness the materialization of the Silent Woman, even if it meant staying up the whole night. Dunky had been equally determined to witness no such thing: he'd opted to spend his night on the *Artful Dodger*, and was undoubtedly sleeping all the more soundly for it.

"Is there a problem, Doctor?" Mesmeron asked in response to the professor's latest snort.

"It's this author," Professor Stebbins said. "He seems incapable of distinguishing between an amulet and a talisman."

"For once we agree," said Mesmeron.

"To call him a rank amateur would only elevate his status," added the professor, letting the monocle slip from his eye as he closed the book in disgust. "If you'll allow me a shameless plug, I ardently recommend my own book on the subject. It's far more authoritative...though I'll admit to being duly taken down a notch when I couldn't locate a copy of it on your shelves."

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"Oh, it's there, I assure you," said Mesmeron. "I've no doubt the rudiments it covers would be of some use to a fledgling occultist."

"Yes, well," the professor replied, smiling wryly. "Your knowledge in the field is undoubtedly on a par with my own...or do I flatter myself?"

Mesmeron deigned not to answer, directing his attention to Clem instead. "Tell me, how does a man such as yourself incur so potent an enemy?"

"Enemy?" Clem nearly choked on his tobacco. "Can't say's I foller ye."

"Enemy, adversary," Mesmeron retorted, "the one responsible for infesting you with the Silent Woman."

"The one responsible...you believe it was intentional?" Professor Stebbins asked, clearly as shocked by the suggestion as Clem was.

"Oh come now, doctor," said Mesmeron. "Surely you don't think the Silent Woman transferred *herself* from the fetlock, do you? How else could she possibly.... What the devil is that infernal stench?"

Clem caught a whiff of it too. He turned to find the professor had cranked open another can of sardines, his eyes taking on the faraway look of a man lost in the deep recesses of thought. "Intentional...I hadn't considered that...."

Suddenly Clem's hair stood on end and he felt his body turn to gooseflesh, both inside and out. "She's here."

The room grew quiet. Out of the silence came a faint sucking noise, just on the edge of hearing. Clem braced himself for the sight that inevitably followed the nursing-infant sound.

There, at the foot of the bed, the Silent Woman faded into view.

"Extra-ordinary," the professor whispered, staring hard at the apparition. Mesmeron stared along with him, a venomous smile commandeering his face.

The Silent Woman remained where she was, neither advancing nor retreating. Clem glanced above her bloodstained collar, looking to where her eyes should be, wishing she'd at least retained that element of human expression, capable of revealing so much. For the first time he felt as though he saw her for what she truly was: a young, frightened girl, lost in space and time.

Mesmeron began to chuckle, near imperceptible at first, yet gaining

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in strength and wickedness until it finally ripened into a full-blown, maniacal laugh.

The sound of it sent a chill through Clem's bones that even the sight of the Silent Woman was hard pressed to match.

It was late morning by the time the expedition to the old Peatybog gravesite got underway. After a lengthy and often heated debate it was determined they would make the journey on Mesmeron's ship, mainly by reason that Mesmeron, upon sight, had deemed the *Artful Dodger* thoroughly unseaworthy, despite the fact that the old lugger had somehow found its way to his island afloat.

Well after noon the party arrived on the stretch of coast that placed them at a point nearest to their final inland destination. It was a rugged shoreline, a seaside cliff made all the more treacherous by the low tide. No sailor worth his salt would have thought to disembark at such a place, but Mesmeron insisted it was the only accessible spot for miles.

Now, hanging for dear life onto the nearly vertical cliff, with the waves crashing far below, Clem questioned his own sanity for agreeing to undertake such a clearly inaccessible route. Below him, Dunky was working his way up the cliffside at a snail's pace, careful not to look down for fear of heights. Above, Professor Stebbins was methodically seeking out suitable hand- and footholds, his massive posterior penduluming overhead dangerously. Sweat darkened the underarms of his tweed coat. The party was led by Mesmeron, whose long, thin frame seemed exceptionally suited for scaling the pronounced incline.

"Surely...the colonists...weren't buried...up here...," panted Professor Stebbins, verbalizing the exact thought on Clem's mind. How on earth had the supply ship crew that had buried the colonists transported the bodies up the precipice? It didn't seem possible.

Then again, nearly an hour ago they had all witnessed a half dozen or so Steptoes scrambling gorilla-fashion up the cliff face as though to them it were second nature, each of them carrying shovels, spades, pickaxes, and other utensils suitable for grave-robbing. Clem supposed that if the supply ship crew had been only half as able as the Steptoe clan, they'd probably made the ascent without undue difficulty.

"The graveyard is this way, I assure you," Mesmeron shouted down

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at them just as he mounted the top. Clem marked the distance he had left to go, and wondered why the Steptoes hadn't bothered lowering a rope to aid in the rest of the party's ascent, which he thought was the reason that Mesmeron had ordered them up the cliff ahead of the others to begin with.

Once everyone had topped the precipice, and taken a much-needed breather, they followed Mesmeron into a dense seaside forest along a freshly cleared path. The Steptoes could be heard up ahead, cutting and sawing, knocking back the undergrowth. Presently the party broke into a small clearing occupied by the Steptoes, and Mesmeron pronounced their arrival. Clem was pleasantly surprised to find that the map had been deceptive — the old colony gravesite did not prove to be very far inland at all.

At their master's command, the Steptoes fanned out across the clearing and began attacking the ground with shovel and spade. It seemed to Clem that Mesmeron's boast for knowing the *precise* location of the grave had been slightly erroneous, or the Steptoes wouldn't be digging their holes in such a hit-or-miss fashion.

The work proceeded slowly. There didn't appear to be any digging tools beyond the ones in current use by the Steptoes, and Clem had the distinct feeling that offering to help in any way would only slow them down. He wandered aimlessly about the clearing, rather wishing his time was engaged with a share of the labor. Dunky, meanwhile, had located a suitable stump for sitting, had scraped off a wad of spruce gum with his pocketknife from the trunk of a nearby tree, and was now commencing to sit and chew.

Walking along the clearing's edge, Clem nearly lost his footing and had to flail his arms pinion-wheel fashion to remain on his feet. Looking down, he discovered he was teetering on the edge of a wide, cavernous hollow leading straight down into the ground.

"Gorry, looks like ye almost stup inta that thunder-hole, Clem," Dunky said, joining Clem's side. The two stared down into the seemingly bottomless pit, listening to the bare whisper of the ocean far below. The sound indicated that the hole most likely connected to a sea-level cave somewhere on the shore. Cavities such as this weren't uncommon along the rocky coast — when the tide came in, the heaving surf would crash

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against the cavern walls and reverberate up the chasm in a deafening roar, thus earning the thunder-hole its name.

Clem and Dunky continued to explore the rest of the clearing in order to expose any other potential hazards. By now the Steptoes had dug and abandoned several holes each, apparently reasoning that the stone-laden soil would have warranted relatively shallow graves. So far they had found nothing.

The day wore on. Professor Stebbins suggested they try a form of dowsing, which he claimed to have reliably used to locate unmarked graves in the past, but Mesmeron dismissed the notion as unnecessary this late in the game. He was confident they would uncover something any moment.

Night was nearly upon them now. Some of the Steptoes set aside their shovels in order to light the lanterns they'd brought with them, while others proceeded to build a bonfire. Clem and Dunky stepped into the forest in search of kindling wood, grateful to be of some use finally. A tall pile of what appeared to be recently cut and vertically stacked brush caught their attention. They pulled on some of the thicker branches until the whole pile fell away, revealing a long face that looked down on them with blazing, demonic eyes. Dunky toppled backward in a scream of terror.

His heart racing, Clem stared up at the devilish face in the dim twilight. He quickly realized it was the topmost figure of a totem pole, a fierce-looking gargoyle with the head and antlers of a moose, the beak and claws of a raptor, and the wings of a bat.

In a snap and rustle of branches Professor Stebbins pushed toward them through the underbrush, drawn by Dunky's startled cry. "Curious!" he exclaimed upon sighting the totem pole. He set his monocle in place and studied the demonic image earnestly. "A representation of P'moola, the Penobscot Indian god of thunder."

At the same moment another commotion began, this one amongst the Steptoes. Several of the hunchbacks lifted small objects high into the air, calling to their master in glee. Professor Stebbins marched back to the dig, eager to see what they had found.

As if atoning for their lack of progress earlier in the evening, the Steptoes now seemed to be uncovering several graves all at once. Professor

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Stebbins joined Mesmeron in examining the first artifact offered: a broken peace pipe.

Professor Stebbins scowled slightly. He accepted the next artifact, which was a tattered, feathered headband. Next were the molded remains of a moccasin. Another Steptoe brought forth a broken bow and a few arrows, and another a tomahawk.

"I don't understand," Professor Stebbins said, surveying their findings. "None of these objects are indicative of English colonials. It's as though we're digging in — "

"An Indian Burial Ground," a helium-strained voice finished for him. From the opposite side of the clearing, Madame Zorla stepped out of the forest.

Professor Stebbins stared wordlessly at the pint-sized spiritualist, clearly confused by her sudden appearance. From their vantage point just within the tree line, Clem and Dunky watched in horror as Mesmeron reared up behind the professor and drew forth the Indian war-club he'd kept hidden under his long frockcoat. Before they could shout a warning, Mesmeron brought the club across the back of Stebbins's head. The professor crumpled to the ground in a gelatinous lump.

"Sorry, Doctor," Mesmeron said without a hint of sincerity. He rummaged through the professor's coat pocket and withdrew the spectral fetlock.

Madame Zorla strolled toward the center of the clearing, stirring the air with her hand as she passed the graves. "I sense his presence...here."

Clem looked on as Mesmeron held the spectral fetlock above the patch of ground indicated by Madame Zorla. The two began reciting strange words in a language Clem had never heard before. Misshapen silhouettes of the Steptoes moved eerily across the bonfire light.

*A black magic ritual!* Clem screamed in his own mind. He glanced at Dunky, whose horrorstricken face was enough to convince him that he wasn't imagining things. Fear overcame them both. They turned to flee deeper into the woods, stumbling hard against an object sprawled lengthwise across the forest floor.

Clem kneeled for a closer look. To his surprise he discovered they had tripped over the body of Chief Louie Poolaw, thoroughly bound and gagged.

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"My gorry, what happened to ye?" Clem whispered to the chief, removing his gag as Dunky worked loose the knots binding his wrists and ankles.

"Steptoes," Chief Louie rumbled in his baritone voice. "They overpowered me. I suspected Mesmeron would come to this place after our meeting at Greasy Frog, so I arrived here first to lie in wait."

"What is this place?" Dunky asked, nervously chewing his spruce gum as he glanced at the nearby totem of the Indian thunder-demon.

"An ancient battlefield and burial ground," Chief Louie replied. "My people placed the totem pole here to ward off unsuspecting trespassers. The Steptoes covered it with branches to conceal its presence from you."

"A burial ground?" Clem felt his heart sink into his chest. It was common knowledge that one should *never* disturb an Indian Burial Ground.

"Micmac Moe and his band of avenging braves were massacred and buried here." Chief Louie rose up, shaking off the remainder of the binding ropes. "Mesmeron will try to use the spectral fetlock to control the spirit of Micmac Moe. He will try and fail."

"They've a'ready begun," Clem informed him.

"Then we must act quickly." Chief Louie led them back to the edge of the clearing. Mesmeron and Madame Zorla still stood at its center, babbling incantations with ritualistic fervor. The Steptoes circled them in awe. Mesmeron raised skyward his Indian war-club as he continued to hold forth the spectral fetlock with his other hand.

A strange, greenish mist condensed out of the air in front of him, forming the image of a battle-scarred Indian warrior, whose face was marred on one side by a hole in his cheek. It was a face that perfectly mirrored the one carved into Mesmeron's war-club.

"We are too late," Chief Louie said. "Quickly, move toward the bonfire!"

Without question, Clem and Dunky followed Chief Louie across the clearing. At the risk of being spotted by the Steptoes, they swung in close to the ritual circle and grabbed hold of Professor Stebbins's limp body, dragging it with them to the fireside.

The three men huddled close to the fire, Professor Stebbins lying supine at their feet. Suddenly the professor moaned, eyes fluttering. He sat

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up and rubbed the knot at the back of his head. "I've been concussed," he pronounced.

"Listen," said Chief Louie. Clem strained his ears, uncertain what exactly he was listening for. Then he heard it: a sound like a great wind, distant at first but drawing ever closer, gathering in from every direction. As the noise grew louder, it gained distinction, taking on the unmistakable quality of the undulating war-whoop of Indian Braves.

Mesmeron and Madame Zorla seemed to take no notice of it. They stared transfixed at the apparition hanging between them. "Look upon your prison," Mesmeron said, presenting the spectral fetlock to the translucent image of Micmac Moe.

"The fetlock will never hold him!" shouted Professor Stebbins, staggering to his feet. "The elemental forces are no longer sufficiently channeled — "

"Silence, you pedantic pedagogue!" commanded Mesmeron. "How readily you forget who crafted this talisman! Let me remind you that it was none other than the Sea Crone who reached beyond the limits of nature to carve her will upon this very scrimshaw — Words and thoughts, inflection and tone, material, place, timing, alignments of worlds and stars, other cycles most are barely even aware of — all of this she applied to the consecration of the spectral fetlock I hold in my grasp. She above all commanded the ultimate secret of altering the natural world to do her bidding."

Professor Stebbins shook his head. "You don't understand. Its power has been — "

"Power?" Mesmeron said, savoring the word. "I'll have power enough to impose my authority on a confused and fearful populace, once the spirit of this infernal savage is securely fettered."

By now the encircling cacophony of war-cry was so loud that even Mesmeron and Madame Zorla harkened to it. Professor Stebbins listened nervously to the ubiquitous sound. "Madame Zorla, surely you want no part in this?"

"Don't you see, professor?" Madame Zorla said. "With the power of the fetlock behind us we can restore Banebridge University to its true purpose — the study of the supernatural world! That is why I pointed you in the direction of Mesmeron's lair. With Micmac Moe under our

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command, the deans will have to listen to reason, we can make them — "

"This isn't the way!" shouted Professor Stebbins.

"What you fail to see, doctor — " began Mesmeron.

"What *you* fail to see, my monomaniacal friend," interjected Professor Stebbins, "is that the spectral fetlock is missing its Key Rune. It cannot function without it."

Mesmeron jerked the fetlock away from the apparition and examined it closely. For the first time he seemed to notice that the apex was gone.

A malicious smile spread across Micmac Moe's ravaged face. From his waistband he withdrew an ethereal tomahawk. Throwing his head back, he released a high, ululating cry and swung the weapon at Mesmeron's scalp.

The tomahawk passed through him like a sunbeam through glass, making no apparent contact at all. Its affect on Mesmeron was obvious, however. He fell to the ground in a scream of pain, clutching his head. Clem recalled how Professor Stebbins had warned them about the spirit-world's touch, and its deadly, bloodcurdling effect.

The Steptoes converged on their master, holding forth their lanterns to keep the Indian spirit at bay. The surrounding war-whoops were upon them now, emanating from the entire perimeter of the clearing. A heavy wind rocked the encircling trees to and fro, and Clem thought he could see the branches taking on the fleeting shapes of war-painted faces and handheld weapons as they swayed in and out of the bonfire's light.

Suddenly a terrible gust whipped through the clearing, extinguishing the Steptoes' lanterns and reducing the bonfire to sporadic flames. The world plunged into near darkness. "Rebuild the fire!" shouted Chief Louie, grabbing a stick and stirring the glowing embers.

The bonfire sparked back to full life, once again casting its flickering glow across the clearing. Clem could see the Steptoes, no longer engulfed in shadow, still hovering over their fallen master, yet something indefinable had changed about them. In unison the Steptoes turned toward the four men standing near the bonfire. Their large, bulging eyes were devoid of all color, and their lips were cracked like brittle parchment.

"Uh, professor?" Clem pointed at the Steptoes, in case he alone was witnessing their strange appearance.

"Oh my," said Professor Stebbins, taking in the scene. "Now *that*, Clem, is possession."

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"Help me up, you fools," Mesmeron gasped, still clutching his head as he tottered uneasily to his feet. He looked down at his servants, who no longer seemed the least bit interested in attending him. "Did you hear me? What the devil is wrong with you?"

From the periphery of the bonfire light came Madame Zorla, positioning herself at the head of the assembly of Steptoes. She faced the men by the fire, and in a masculine voice quite unlike her own, said "Kill 'um."

The Steptoes picked up the shovels, pickaxes, and spades lying scattered across the ground. "I command you to cease what you're doing at once," Mesmeron said. One of the Steptoes swung a pickaxe at him, missing his head by mere inches. Mesmeron shrieked, dodging another blow, and ran to join the others by the fire.

"What's got inta 'em?" Dunky asked as the Steptoes began to advance.

"Madame Zorla is clearly channeling the spirit of Micmac Moe against her will," Professor Stebbins replied.

"And my servants?" asked Mesmeron.

"Much like purebred dogs, I suspect they are predisposed to certain unforeseeable genetic infirmities," Professor Stebbins answered carefully, "in this particular case, a unique susceptibility to possession."

"Possession!" exclaimed Mesmeron. "All of them? You can't be serious!"

"I am," said the professor. "And if it's true that the Steptoes were intentionally bred for slavish compliance by your ancestors, then the Stoddards are in some measure answerable for it."

With a unified war-whoop the Steptoes attacked. Clem caught the handle of one shovel just before it made contact, but another took him at the back of the knees. As he hit the ground he could see that Dunky and Professor Stebbins weren't faring much better — each grappled with a Steptoe of their own, and had already suffered several cuts and bruises. Mesmeron had managed to wrest a spade from one Steptoe and was now beating him relentlessly with it. The physically imposing Chief Louie faced off against the diminutive Madame Zorla, reciting an ancient Indian chant in an attempt to drive the evil spirit of Micmac Moe from her body.

Clem wrestled his Steptoe to the ground, rolling dangerously close to the bonfire. In desperation he grabbed hold of a small rock and drove it into

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his adversary's temple again and again until he felt the body go limp. Jumping to his feet, he noticed that the bloodied object in his hand wasn't an ordinary rock at all, but was instead the spectral fetlock. "At least it's good fer somethin'," he muttered out loud.

"It's all...my fault...that fetlock...don't work," Dunky cried, trying to disarm his opponent of his pickaxe through a game of tug-o'-war. "If only...I'd left it...in my...baitshack...it wouldn'ta...got damaged...."

"In your baitshack?" Professor Stebbins said, struggling to maintain a headlock on his particular Steptoe. "I thought you'd kept it on the *Artful Dodger*?"

"Nawp." Dunky tumbled over backward as the pickaxe yanked free from his opponent's grasp. "Didn't move it to th' *Dodger* till I used it to make Granny Feagle that new brooch," he said, lying flat on his back.

"A brooch for Granny Feagle?" Professor Stebbins said. "I thought you'd used it to make a rook for Admiral Seabury's chessboard?"

"Or mebbe I used it to make a new cuff button fer ol' Hornpout's dress shirt...," Dunky said, chewing hard on his spruce gum.

"Well which was it!" Clem shouted. Not that it mattered, now that he had his hands full with another Steptoe. The hunchback lunged on him like a thing possessed, which of course he was, forcing him to move away from the bonfire's protective radiance. Beyond the edge of its illumination he could see ghostly Indian braves pacing the perimeter, occasionally firing ethereal arrows toward him, all of which dissipated before traveling very far into the luminous sphere of the fire's light.

Clem recalled what Mesmeron had earlier experienced with Micmac Moe's tomahawk, and was determined not to suffer a similar fate with the arrows. He pushed back against the Steptoe, sending the two of them into a whirling, stumbling dance. Where they stopped was a place some distance from the bonfire, though still within the shielding reach of its light. Clem felt the ground below his feet starting to give way and, looking down, discovered he was teetering once again on the brink of the thunder-hole. How he'd not realized it was there was beyond him — the hole was roaring like a lion, now that the tide had come in.

Back at the bonfire, Clem could see Professor Stebbins and Dunky continuing their argument over what exactly the fetlock had been used for. Even Mesmeron seemed to have joined in on the squabble. Suddenly

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the three men stopped their heated motions and swung around to face in Clem's direction. At once they began shouting toward him, gesturing frantically, though what they were shouting was impossible to hear over the deafening bellow of the thunder-hole. A moment later the ground beneath his feet broke free, toppling him and the Steptoe into the abyss.

With a paralyzing thud Clem landed flat against a ledge protruding out from the cavern wall some fifteen feet below the opening. The Steptoe was not so lucky; he missed the ledge and continued down the hole into the roaring waters beneath.

Before he could catch his breath, Clem felt himself being attacked from all sides. In the surrounding darkness he could just barely make out his assailants — Dunky, Professor Stebbins, and Mesmeron — who had all apparently raced to the chasm and climbed down after him. They continued to shout wildly in his direction, an obviously useless endeavor in the thunder-hole, and grabbed him roughly by the arms. Clem threw them off, coming to the sudden realization that — like the Steptoes — his friends must have become possessed by the spirits of the Indian braves.

He attempted to escape up the cavern wall, but Dunky wrestled him flat against the ledge floor, hands pressing around his throat and face. Professor Stebbins sat heavily on his chest — a predicament that could likely break ribs — and proceeded to fumble a sardine can from his coat pocket. Dunky pried Clem's jaw open as the professor removed the key from the can and attempted to lower the looped end of it into Clem's mouth.

Panic overtook him. He thrashed frantically, knocking the key from the professor's hand and elbowing Dunky in the face. Breaking free, he staggered to his feet, only to be accosted by Mesmeron, who caught him with a left hook across the jaw. Clem reeled, and Mesmeron landed a few more well-placed punches before Clem was able to kick him in the shin.

Swallowing hard, Clem scrambled up the treacherous wall of the thunder-hole, the taste of his own blood strong in his mouth. He emerged to find the remaining Steptoes engaged in battle with Chief Louie, who had evidently failed to drive the evil spirit from Madame Zorla's body, as she was now approaching him from behind, shovel held at the ready.

"Chief Louie, watch out!" Clem shouted, but the words were overpowered by the roar of the thunder-hole. He limped across the clearing as

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quickly as he could, reaching Madame Zorla as she was about to fell the mighty chief with a swing of her shovel. Clem snatched it from her hand and brought it squarely down on her head. The tiny woman crumpled to the ground.

"Stop!" shouted voices behind him. Clem turned. Professor Stebbins, Dunky, and Mesmeron had climbed free of the thunder-hole, and were fast approaching him.

Clem brandished his shovel, reluctant to use it against his friends but knowing what little choice he had while they were still possessed by the braves.

"Put the shovel down, Clem," shouted Professor Stebbins. "You don't understand! We've been trying to tell you, it's your tooth! Dunky used the fetlock to make your new tooth!"

Clem lowered his shovel. That was it, then, the missing piece of the puzzle. His tooth! That's what the others had been trying to shout at him. That's what the professor had attempted to remove down in the thunder-hole. His friends weren't possessed after all, they were only trying to get at the tooth.

"Look, over there!" Chief Louie shouted, knocking two Steptoes head to head and dropping them to the ground. From the corner of his eye Clem saw a greenish mist rising from Madame Zorla's body. It shimmered eerily in the dim light, molding itself into the figure of Micmac Moe.

"It's my new tooth!" Clem said to Chief Louie. "That's what's kept th' Silent Woman tied to me all this time."

"I heard," said the chief. "Remove it now. It must contain the Key Rune."

Clem fished his bloody mouth with his tongue, only to discover an empty space where his new tooth should be. "It's gone!"

Joined by the others, the group collectively turned to look upon the spirit of Micmac Moe hovering above Madame Zorla's body. The blackness beyond the clearing grew loud once again with the Indian war-cries, and the vicious winds redoubled their efforts. "Clem, remove the tooth now!" Professor Stebbins shouted.

Clem pulled back the corner of his mouth to reveal the empty space. "I think Mesmeron knocked it loose down in th' hole."

"We must find it then," said the professor. They all looked back at the thunder-hole, realizing the near impossibility of the task.

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Suddenly, before all their eyes, the Silent Woman appeared. Clem instantly sensed a change in her, felt it viscerally, knew that for the first time in centuries the Silent Woman was *enraged*. Her infant faced the group and hissed, expressing the emotion its mother could not. Everyone jumped from their skins.

The Silent Woman charged. The men threw themselves out of her way. She hurtled through the passageway left in their wake, paying them no notice. Turning to follow her path of travel, Clem realized who her true target was.

Micmac Moe was waiting for her. He swung his tomahawk in sadistic glee, aiming high, but the Silent Woman hadn't been a suitable candidate for scalping in over three centuries. She locked her fingers around his neck, trying futilely to squeeze the life from a being that no longer lived.

The men huddled close together. Winds whipped through the clearing from every direction, threatening to eradicate the bonfire once and for all. The sky roiled with black clouds. Clem thought he heard thunder. The Silent Woman and Micmac Moe grappled savagely, growing larger and larger before the onlookers' eyes, clashing like phantasmal titans.

"Clem, your tooth!" Professor Stebbins shouted above the din.

"I'm not a-goin' fer it now!" Clem shouted back.

"No," said the professor. "You don't understand. The Silent Woman is *here!* That means the tooth must be here as well!"

Clem shook his head. "But Mesmeron knocked it loose. If it's not in the hole, then it must be..." He looked up at the group, and they looked at him.

"It could be a few days afore it passes," Dunky said.

They didn't have a few minutes, let alone a few days. Chief Louie cocked back his fist and slammed it into Clem's gut, doubling him over with locomotive force. The tooth shot up his gullet and fired past his lips, landing some distance on the ground.

Pressing through the buffeting winds, Clem retrieved the tooth. He held it up to the bonfire light — carved into its surface was an odd, twisted letter from some unheard-of alphabet.

"Clem, take this!" shouted the professor. He was rooting around a cluster of small white stones, any of which could have passed for the

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fetlock, and, picking one up, pitched it toward Clem, who caught it with ease. "It won't function properly until it's reassembled!"

Clem turned the small white object in his hand. Sure enough, it was the fetlock. He placed the tooth in its gouged apex, but the fit was too loose to keep it in place. "Use this," said Dunky, removing the spruce gum from his mouth.

By now the feuding specters had grown enormously in size. The black clouds above threw down bolts of lightning with an unnatural frequency, striking the tiny clearing with hellish fury. The prostrate body of Madame Zorla still rested upon the ground, just below the otherworldly combatants. Clem pressed the tooth into the wad of spruce gum, then pressed this combination into the apex of the fetlock.

"Now, Clem!" shouted Professor Stebbins.

Covering his eyes against the blinding thunderbolts, Clem heaved the reunited fetlock in the direction of the apparitions. It flew through the air, hit the ground, bounced twice, and found its final resting place atop Madame Zorla.

Instantly the wind swirled above the fetlock, condensing into a tight angry funnel that reached heavenward to the black clouds above. The apparitions were trapped within, yet so engrossed with waging war against each other that they seemed not to notice. Amidst the lightning strikes and crashing thunder the two were drawn ever downward, slowly but steadily, the wailing winds reaching a crescendo as they slid into the imprisoning clutches of the fetlock.

Clem watched the Silent Woman and Micmac Moe vanish for an eternity together inside the fetlock. At that moment the wind shifted to a fluttering pitch, one that he would forever swear had mimicked the spine-chilling cackle of a witch's laughter.

The clearing lulled to a deathly silence. No one dared move or speak, with the exception of Mesmeron, who was prevented from retrieving the fetlock only by the powerful grip of Chief Louie. Presently a shaft of morning light reached over the horizon, and a bird sang out from the encircling trees. Professor Stebbins stepped forward cautiously and picked up the fetlock. "Extra-ordinary," was all he said.

One by one the Steptoes came to, no longer in a state of possession, and clearly oblivious to the drama that had so recently unfolded around

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them and the role they had played in it. At last Madame Zorla stirred to life. "P-Professor?" she stammered in her squeaky voice. "What happened?"

Professor Stebbins turned away from Madame Zorla and began to stroll, seeming to gather his thoughts. He kneeled down over a cluster of small white rocks and absently flipped them in his hand. "What happened, Madame Zorla," he said, "was your misguided attempt to control Micmac Moe went horribly awry, nearly resulting in the destruction of everything and everyone standing in this field. I realize now what a fool I was." He stood quickly, turning, the anger in his eyes directed at both Madame Zorla and Mesmeron. "I never should have revealed the fetlock's existence to either of you. Where power exists, there also you'll find those who would use it for their own selfish ends. The fetlock's potential for evil is far too great. For that reason I must ensure that it never falls into the wrong hands."

Momentarily holding the fetlock high for all to see, Professor Stebbins reared back and lobbed it in the air.

"Nooo!" Madame Zorla squealed, breaking into a dead run. The fetlock soared overhead, arcing toward the thunder-hole. Mesmeron pulled free from Chief Louie's grip and sprinted to intercept. He jumped, his long fingers reaching, snatching the fetlock in midair.

"Watch out!" shouted Professor Stebbins, but it was too late. Madame Zorla collided into Mesmeron, knocking them both off balance. The two teetered for a moment then plunged headlong into the thunder-hole.

"Massster!" shouted the Steptoes, joining the rest of the group as they rushed to the hole. Cautiously everyone peered over the edge.

Nothing was there, save for the vacant ledge and the violent, roiling surf below.

FOR THE FIRST TIME in a long time, Clem watched the sun dip toward the horizon without an impending sense of dread. He was free of his nightly visitant, free to enjoy his evenings surrounded by company of a more companionable, more *corporeal*, nature.

"My gorry, ain't it a good feelin', Clem?" said Dunky, grinning like a dog eating bumblebees. "Th' Silent Woman gone away, us back to our ol' routine...I even heard th' missus let ye move back inta th' fishhouse."

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"Ayuh, she did," Clem said. "There's a downside to everythin'."

"Hmmmmm," rumbled Chief Louie, whether in response to Clem's comment or some other personal thought was anyone's guess. The three of them sat around the cracker-barrel on the front stoop of the Pogey House, watching Professor Stebbins battling his wits against Admiral Seabury. The checkers had been put away, and in their place were the chessmen, including the new hand-carved rook, compliments of Dunky.

"Your move," said Admiral Seabury, drawing smoke through his new briarwood pipe. "Fish or cut bait."

Professor Stebbins surveyed the chessboard. "Bishop to queen's rook seven," he said, announcing his move at the same time he repositioned the piece, as was his habit.

Clem fought down an urge to examine the new rook for runes. It was a foolish, fleeting thought — Dunky had fashioned it from another piece of scrimshaw, *not* the fetlock, at least that much had been established. "I wonder why ye never saw th' Silent Woman yeself, havin' kept th' fetlock all that time?" he asked Dunky.

"Because in all that time it was never in his proximity," Professor Stebbins answered instead. "Up until the day Dunky removed the fetlock to his ship, in order to fashion your new tooth, it was stored in his baitshack, a place he invariably had little reason to enter after sundown. The Silent Woman was appearing nightly, no doubt, but no one was there to witness it."

"Pshaw! All this nonsense 'bout th' Silent Woman," Admiral Seabury huffed. "Seein' is believin', I allers say...." Suddenly he seemed to recall what he himself had seen, right on this very stoop, and immediately drew quite pensive.

"And what about the fetlock now?" Chief Louie asked. He was smoking a long-stemmed peace pipe shaped like a hatchet, and looking at Professor Stebbins with steady, unreadable eyes. "Are you satisfied that it's properly contained?"

Professor Stebbins flushed slightly. "Contained? Dispatched would be a more suitable term. You saw what happened. I don't imagine the fetlock will ever trouble anyone again."

Clem couldn't see how. After its fall into the strong current at the bottom of the thunder-hole, the fetlock was almost certainly swept out to

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sea, beyond recovery. Even the bodies of Mesmeron and Madame Zorla had yet to be found.

"Th' fetlock's gone, an' th' Silent Woman with it," Dunky said with finality. "Ye figger Micmac Moe was the one what killed 'er to begin with?"

"Heavens, no," Professor Stebbins replied. "More than a century separated them in life. It does seem to me that each represented a deep-seated animosity in the other, though. Hardly surprising, in light of how the two had met their respective ends. Oh, my apologies, Admiral...pawn to king four."

"In that case," said Admiral Seabury. "Check an' mate."

"Oh my." Professor Stebbins positioned his monocle and examined the board. "I've been summarily trounced."

"I jus' beat a college professy!" crowed Admiral Seabury. "Goes to show there's some things ye can't git from book-learnin'. Best two outta three?"

"Another time, I promise," the professor said. "It's almost nightfall, and I must be getting back to Banebridge. Ms. Bevilacqua? My overcoat please."

The bird-thin woman who'd arrived at the Pogey House earlier in the afternoon — only to spend the intervening hours waiting patiently for the professor to finish his chess match — stirred from her seat and handed him his coat.

"Thank you, Ms. Bevilacqua," said Professor Stebbins.

"What is that in your coat pocket, professor?" Chief Louie asked, with the same nondescript expression in his eyes.

"Just a sardine can," Professor Stebbins replied, patting the visible bulge at the breast of his coat. "Would you care for one? I find they help sally the concentration, which could be of inestimable value to whichever of you is next to sit across from the admiral's chessboard!"

Chief Louie neither accepted nor declined, but continued to look at the professor in the same curious fashion.

"Gentlemen," Professor Stebbins finally said, nodding to the gathering on the stoop and turning to walk away.

"One moment, professor!" Clem shouted before Professor Stebbins and Ms. Bevilacqua disappeared down the road. He jumped from the stoop and raced to catch up.

"Yes, Clem?"

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"That *is* a sardine can in yer pocket, ain't it?" Clem asked.

"Why Clem," Professor Stebbins smiled broadly. "I'm never without my sardines. How else am I to maintain your childhood nickname for me...Fishbreath, was it not?"

Clem blushed. So the professor *did* remember after all. "I guess I'm jus' a-frighted that th' Silent Woman might come back someday, is all."

"Benevolence Dunham won't trouble you again," Professor Stebbins said. He looked at Clem for several long moments, hoping his words would reassure the man who had suffered so much, but seeing clearly that they did not. Finally he reached into his coat pocket and withdrew the familiar scrimshaw, complete with its wad of spruce gum and runic tooth.

"Professor?" Clem stared, awestruck at the sight of the spectral fetlock.

"Clem, my friend," Professor Stebbins said with a wink. "Let's just say your troubles have been properly salted and canned."

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*The US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reported this year that the flu shot administered around the US was effective against only 40% of this year's flu viruses. Keep that in mind as you read this little bit of speculation.*

# Character Flu

## *By Robert Reed*

LOOK AT ME.

That's right, you don't know me. Now please, put down your drink and pay attention to me. I'm here as a courtesy, and there's something very important that you have to understand.

Are you listening?

There's a new disease, and without question, it's the worst ever. There's never been anything like it. Not in the history of mankind, not even close. Nanobodies: Synthetically produced nanotic machinery. The idiots in the interactive industry built the monsters. Of course they didn't appreciate what they had. Couldn't imagine the dangers. When their bug went wild, they called that "an exceptionally minor nonevent." When the bug learned to self-replicate, they promised to rein it in with some elegant little fixes. And today, after throwing fifty billion dollars at the problem, those responsible have admitted they're beaten. Their monsters have evolved into a plague that's highly transmittable, unnoticed by any immune system. Just one microscopic machine gets ingested or slips

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through the skin, and within minutes, it's riding the bloodstream to the brain. And once there, it generates hundreds of billions of examples of its perfect, insidious self.

No, it doesn't bring death.

For a long time, there aren't any symptoms. No fevers. No weakness. No diminishment of body or mind. In fact, the fully infected person sports a boosted IQ, plus this giant imagination. But that's not surprising, since the original nanobody was designed to do exactly that. Those trillion invaders link up with their host's neurons, streamlining an assortment of brain functions, and suddenly tasks that used to be difficult become astonishingly easy.

No, the disease doesn't kill.

It creates.

During the last six months, the population of the world has increased two hundredfold. And that's the conservative estimate.

No, you haven't heard anything about this plague. And there's a perfectly good explanation why you haven't.

Listen.

What happened was that those tech-wizards in the interactive market — those creative geniuses of commerce — thought it would be fun and sweet, not to mention lucrative, to build gaming platforms that their customers could carry wherever they went, embedded inside willing skulls. That's why the nanobodies do what they do. They bring improvements to cognitive functions. Think of them as an upgrade of old hardware. A little perk to every user. The brain gets quicker and smarter, so there's plenty of room for whatever diversion the buyer desires. And creativity has to be boosted, if only so the player can enjoy an experience that's promised to be unlike any other on the market today.

And the nanobody that went wild...?

It invents characters. Phony people that seem very real to the user. The entire package isn't much different from certain computer games that were popular during the last century. But then again, when hasn't human history been full of fictional worlds and imaginary friends?

This is how the disease works:

An infected person thinks of somebody. He picks a face in the crowd, or she dreams somebody up from nothing. Fantasy souls of their own invention. Then the machinery builds a character to match the face,

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guided by the host's supercharged creativity. These new entities are so carefully drawn that they acquire many if not all of the aspects of real life. Independence. Self-awareness. A life story, plus a huge capacity for love and hate.

Give the wild nanobodies a few busy weeks, and they'll infect any skull with a town's worth of artfully rendered citizens. These new people inhabit any dreamed-up landscape that suits them. Mountains are popular, and beaches, and drinking establishments, too. In principle, the infected person can visit whenever he wants, talk and touch whomever he wants. But he sees only tiny slivers of his new friends' rich, enormous lives.

Why is that bad?

Okay, that's a fair question.

Trouble comes sooner or later. You see, those fictional souls have their own lucid daydreams. Maybe they imagine a secret lover, or they want to have a child or three. Whatever the inspiration, they can trigger the same machinery that created them in the first place. And what's been a manageable population swells, and a disease that was only a nuisance suddenly overwhelms the infected, overtaxed mind.

This wouldn't happen with the original nanobody. It couldn't. But the wild bug has dropped all of the carefully contrived safeguards.

No matter how much genius a person carries, he has limits. The first symptom is to lose the elevated IQ. Then decision-making and recall slow down. If left unchecked, the infected person falls into a deep sleep, followed by a coma, while his brain works slower and slower as an entire nation of fictional souls struggle to live their important lives.

To date, the only treatment — not a cure, mind you, but only a short-term fix — is to physically remove these parasitic characters.

And it's not an easy fix.

I won't mention the physical constraints, which are enormous. But worse are the ethical problems. Purge the mind of thousands of living souls, and what are you doing?

You're committing mass murder, some say.

Says hundreds of billions of people, if you bother to ask them.

The imagined souls, yes.

But if humanity doesn't fight this runaway plague, everybody will become a host. Everybody will be unconscious and helpless. The meat-

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and-bone population of the world will live out its days in hospital beds, their minds progressively declining, their minimal needs tended to by machinery and empathetic software.

So you see, this is the worst disease ever.

No matter what the response, billions and eventually trillions of sentient entities are going to die. Will have to be killed. Yet for the time being, there is no other viable option.

Believe me when I say this: The best that we can do is to treat every last casualty with the same respect that humans would want, if these tragic roles were reversed.

Now put down the drink again, please.

No, I don't think you have been paying attention. Not like you should have been!

You're right. I haven't introduced myself.

Think of me as an angel.

As a servant from On High.

Now do I have your attention?

In the clearest possible terms, this angel is telling you that you have exactly one day to make peace with everybody in your world, and with yourself.

Did you hear me?

One day.

Or do I need to explain all this to you again?

## COMING ATTRACTIONS

OUR FIRST ATTRACTION of note isn't a *coming* attraction, it has arrived: *F&SF* now has a blog. You can find news, links, ends, and odds online at *http://www.sfsite.com/fsf/blog/*.

Next month's cover story is a new novella by Michael Blumlein. In "The Roberts," Mr. Blumlein blends architecture and genetic engineering into a unique and compelling tale. This novella's one of a kind.

Matthew Hughes returns next month with "Fulbrim's Finding," a new tale of Penultimate Earth.

The months ahead also promise new stories by Terry Bisson, James L. Cambias, Albert E. Cowdrey, Carolyn Ives Gilman, and Stephen King. Make sure your subscription is current so you won't miss any issues!

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*P. E. Cunningham assures us that no animals were harmed during the creation of this story.*

# Monkey See...

## *By P. E. Cunningham*

SEEN FROM THE WESTERN Road, the village didn't look like the type of place to pose any threat to the Emperor. Ji sat her horse and assessed it with a warrior's eye. No walls, no fortifications. The fields across the road were green with crops, but small. Doubtful they produced enough food in a season to support the populace, let alone a substantial fighting force.

The only defensible edifice sat atop a bare hillock overlooking the village. The two-story house had obviously been designed to copy the lofty palace in the City of Wonders. Out here it would no doubt pass for a mansion, or had at one time. Even from the road it looked run-down and shabby. Unless the curve of the hillock concealed a barracks, there was no way that place up there could house an army either.

And the threat of war had traveled east from here? Ji shook her head.

Yet there was the strip of parchment in her pocket, arrived at the palace by carrier hawk, with a scrawled warning on it, and Kaito's mark. Kaito was a clever man and a skillful spy and never given to panic. She stared at the village some more.

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"What do you think?" she asked Shakaru. "Are we in the right place?"

*The directions were accurate,* the soul sword she wore strapped to her back whispered in her mind. *I wouldn't be so quick to dismiss this place. I sense magic here.*

Ji snorted. "From where? That wreck on the hill? That barn over there? I know wizards, Shakaru. They don't live in squalor. Perhaps an army did pass through here and they had a wizard with them. If so, they've long moved on."

*And I know zhindi warriors. They don't discount the warnings of their swords. There's something off about this place. Tread carefully.*

"As you say," she muttered. Zhindi, yes, but still new to the title, without yet even any battle-born nicks on her armor. Still, she felt confident she could carry out this simple task for the Emperor, without any undue nagging from Shakaru.

She kneed her horse forward and walked it up the silent street, all her senses alert for signs of trouble. It was a quiet place, for a supposed hotbed of belligerence. You'd think a town on the brink of war would ring with the sound of swords on the forge and the creak of battle wagons and the neighs of horses and the shouts of men. But no noises reached her beyond the trill of birds and the cries of startled monkeys. She spotted one horse, standing untethered before a smithy, with three monkeys clinging to its back and picking fleas off its coat. The smithy was empty, its fires cold ash. Ji frowned and rode on.

By the time she'd passed the halfway point, she'd decided the village held no human life. The monkeys convinced her of that. The wretched little things were everywhere, in the houses, on the roofs, peering out at her from open windows and behind doors left ajar. A line of them paralleled her course up on the rooftops. Their chatter implied either warning or threat, she couldn't determine which.

"It's deserted," she said. "Perhaps that army Kaito spoke of moved to a better position. There may be cause for concern after all."

*It can't be deserted,* Shakaru said. *I feel human life all around us.*

"Where?" Ji stared at a silk-merchant's shop. Little monkey faces peeked out at her from behind bolts of shimmering fabric. "I tell you, they've moved on."

*Not all of them.*

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"No? Then where — " She stopped, and sniffed. Beneath the odor of dust and rot she caught a whiff of frying fish and boiling lentils. So. Unless the monkeys had learned to cook, the village still held at least one human occupant. Ji urged her horse in that direction.

The aromas emanated from a small inn just off the main street, snuggled up against a bare cliff that formed the southern face of the hillock. Someone had fixed a rope ladder to the cliff. No doubt it led to the mansion above. She marked its position as she reined in her horse before the inn. She dismounted, drew Shakaru, and slipped inside.

Unlike the rest of this empty village, the dining room showed signs of upkeep. Perhaps the monkeys had done it. Five of them chased each other noisily over the tables and chairs. They skidded to five separate, startled halts and stared up at her. Four shrieked and fled toward the source of the fish smell — the kitchen, Ji surmised — but the fifth charged her, miniature tusks bared in threat. The male, no doubt.

Ji was no stranger to monkeys, having eaten quite a few in her childhood. She captured him easily. He screeched and thrashed in her grip. "You're a fat one," she murmured. "Who is it's been cooking for you?"

A deeper, only slightly more human scream burst from the kitchen doorway. Ji glanced up. The man was as skinny as a grasshopper, and armed with a ladle. He rushed at Ji. She tossed the monkey away and set herself to meet him. He veered and dropped his ladle and dove for the monkey instead. He caught it out of the air and clutched it to his chest like a favored infant. The monkey howled and sank its fingers into his lank, greasy hair.

For a moment they gawked at each other, Ji wary, the man dumbfounded. Finally his stare dropped from her face to the Imperial sigil on her breastplate. He blinked and set the monkey aside. It scampered into the kitchen.

"You're real?" he said in a creaky voice. "You're human?"

"I've come from the Emperor," Ji said. "We've heard rumors of an army massing in these parts. I was sent to investigate — "

"You can't stay here." The man scrambled up and caught her arm and tried to shove her out the door. "You have to go now, before he discovers you're here — "

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Ji set her feet and refused to budge. The man wrestled harder. He started to whimper. "Before who discovers me?" Ji demanded.

The man's gaze darted over her shoulder, out the doorway and into the street. He croaked and shoved away from her, then dropped to his knees and pressed his forehead to the floor. "Lord Shibo."

Ji whirled, holding Shakaru up and at the ready. Seconds later she lowered him again. This was no wizard or warlord. The man outside was, if anything, even filthier than the cook. His limbs were long and spindly and attached to a compact trunk. He stood in a kind of bow-legged hunch. He carried no weapons. His armor, if one could call it that, was a mishmash of ill-fitting pieces that looked as if he'd scavenged them off a battlefield, and from the losing side. Tufts of wiry, reddish hair stuck out from behind the bits of armor and from underneath his oversized helmet. His eyes were huge and almond-gold, with next to no white in them.

Those eyes fixed on Shakaru now, with such greed Ji nearly backed a step. "A sword!" he exulted, in a voice as shrill as the shrieks of the monkeys. "Now I can go to war!" He lunged through the doorway with hands outstretched.

He was quick, she granted him that. But demented, to try to grab a sword by the blade. Especially a soul sword. She sidestepped easily and swatted the pathetic creature on his backside with the flat of her blade as he stumbled past. The "warlord" hit the floor. The prostrate cook moaned in misery.

Scarcely had he touched the floor than he bounded up again. This time, instead of charging, he bounced up and down and showed his teeth. They were quite large, and a hideous yellow. "My sword! Mine! I'm going to war and I must have a sword! Give it to me!"

*He's mad,* Ji decided. *Maybe they both are. Something in the water or the food? Perhaps that's why the others left.* "I think I'll keep the sword for now. Tell me what happened to this village. Where did the people go?"

"People? People?" The "warlord" stopped bouncing and giggled. "Gone! All gone! I did that! Me! I'm going to war. Men go to war, and I'm a man. I want that sword! Give it here!"

"Lord Shibo, please." The cook tugged at a swatch of the man's ragged tunic. "You will have your sword. But first, why not a cup of tea? And lunch. I've prepared the lemon fish, your favorite — "

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"No! No time to eat! I have to go to war!" His shouting rose beyond words, into an inarticulate screech. Ji winced. The monkeys sounded more melodious.

*Shakaru*? she mentally whispered. *Is he crazy*? *What do we do*?

*Lift me back up into guard position. I can't get an accurate sense of him. There's magic at work here. It's muddying things —*

The "warlord's" screech broke off abruptly. He giggled, showing off those stained, enormous teeth. "You can't keep the sword if you can't hold onto it. *Ya mano hanu rii!*"

The air around Ji seemed to solidify and crush in upon her. It pressed here, squeezed there, pinched in other places. She felt as if she were a sheet of paper compacted in a fist. Or maybe more like *folded*, like the little origami pieces Kaito liked to make. She hadn't even breath to cry out. Shakaru, suddenly impossibly heavy, tumbled from her hands. He clattered on the floor.

Instantly the grinning madman swooped in and scooped him up. He danced with glee across the floor. "Mine! Mine now! My sword to go to war with! Now I'm a man!" He galloped into the street and disappeared.

Shakaru's dwindling protests pierced Ji's head like assassins' daggers. Some zhindi. How could she lose him like that? She struggled up.

Wait. What was wrong with her arms? These weren't her arms. They were too long and spindly. And where was her armor? And where had all this fur come from?

*Oh no. Guardian gods of the zhindi, no....*

She squinted her eyes shut, turned her head, and cautiously cracked one eyelid open. There was a tail back there. *Her* tail.

Her roar of protest came out as a high-pitched shriek. The monkeys peering at her through the kitchen doorway ducked out of sight again.

"I tried to warn you," the cook said. He lifted her easily in one hand. Ji was too stunned to protest. "Well, now you're here with the rest of us. You'll just have to make the best of it. Would you like some tea?"

At least the tea was hot. Ji clasped the cup between her tiny, furry paws and sipped it while she tried to calm herself. The cook puttered around the kitchen. Resignation appeared to have granted him a fatalistic serenity. Up on a high shelf crouched a line of monkeys: the five small

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beasts she'd surprised in the dining room, and a larger, plump female with dark, shiny fur. They chattered incessantly among themselves.

"My wife," the cook confirmed, noting the direction of her stare. "My son. My daughters. *He* did it. Lord Shibo, he calls himself. We don't know where he came from. He just appeared one day. He planned to go to war, he said, and we would be his army. What army? we said. We're growers and gatherers. We laughed at him. So he started...." He poured himself a cup of tea and downed it at a gulp. "There's no one left human anymore, only me. Villagers, strangers, travelers, he changed them all. He left me alone because he likes my cooking." He shook his head over the fish and removed the pan from the fire. "I guess he doesn't want this now. Would you like some? It's no good cold."

Ji scratched her fur. Where had her armor gone? Banished to some magical place, maybe. Why hadn't Shakaru transformed? Because he wasn't flesh? Or because he was protected by a soul sword's magic? He might have protected *her* while he was about it. Thoughtless hunk of steel. She had to get him back.

Where had that lunatic carried him off to? Her mental cry brought a faint response, distant and somewhat above her. Of course: the shabby mansion on the hillock. Just the place to house a shabby warlord.

She set her cup aside, dove off the counter and raced for the door. "Hey, wait!" the cook yelled after her. "Don't you want some cake?"

Monkeys scattered in all directions when Ji burst outside. She paid them no attention. *Don't think about what happened. Get Shakaru back. Keep moving and stay angry.* Such tactics had always served her well before.

Come to think of it, her current situation wasn't all that different from her childhood. Once again she was small and spry and thrust to the bottom of society's ladder, a target for those bigger, stronger, and wielding more power than she. Now, as then, she would have to be quicker, smarter and more resourceful. At least until she recovered Shakaru and became human again.

Her eye fell upon the rope ladder depending from the cliffside. More convenient for a hungry madman than traveling all the way 'round by the path. Convenient for her as well. Her new, enchanted body was designed

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for leaps and scrambling. She reached the top of the inn in two easy jumps and swarmed quick as a bug up the ladder. How insane was he, to think even a shape-changed zhindi wouldn't fight back?

At the top she paused and took stock. The mansion wasn't quite as decrepit as she'd assumed from the road, merely unkept. Roof tiles had blown off and not been replaced, and no one had swept the courtyard or raked and pruned the gardens. Best of all, windows and doors gaped wide, with no guards or servants in sight. Nevertheless, she crept up to the nearest door, and sniffed and listened thoroughly before she inched inside. Marching arrogantly into an unknown situation hadn't done her any good so far.

Here, as below, she found monkeys. The mansion's staff, no doubt. They fled at her approach, with a good deal of screeching and scolding. One wizened old fellow held to his perch atop a high-backed chair. White, drooping whiskers gave the illusion of mustaches, and his wiry fur was shot through with gray. He eyed her with sullen suspicion. Ji kept her own wary gaze on him while she sent out a thought for her soul sword. *Shakaru, where are you?*

*In this place's main hall, on the first floor. Would you hurry it up? This idiot's no hand at all with a sword. He's already dropped me three times.*

*Is he alone? Are there guards?*

*He's the only one in human form. Everyone else is a monkey. What about you? What shape are you in?*

She bypassed the question. *How strong a wizard is he? Can you tell?*

*I don't think he's a wizard. I'm not sure what he is, except he's no swordsman. Please tell me you have a plan.*

Ji bypassed that one too. *Keep him occupied. I'll try to sneak up on him.*

She had a firm fix in her mind on Shakaru's location now. She trotted across the polished stone floor.

*For all the good that will do —*

She stopped short. That wasn't Shakaru's voice. The only other being in the room was the grizzled monkey. Ji stared up at him. *Was that you?*

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The monkey started visibly. His ratty tail curled over his back. *You can hear me? How?*

Two bounds and a hop brought Ji to his side. *I'm zhindi. We converse with our swords. You develop a knack. Who are you?*

*Zhindi...that explains the soul sword. I wondered where Shibo got hold of it. I am Chuin.* He took in the mansion with a wave of his crooked paw. *Master wizard and lord of this place.*

*You're a monkey.*

*So are you, zhindi warrior.*

Ji snorted. *It isn't hard to guess what happened to you. Lord Shibo's been a busy boy.*

*"Lord" Shibo is it, now? The little scamp! I should have tanned his hide for a hat when I had the chance.*

*Who is he? A fellow wizard?*

Chuin laughed at that. It came out as a spate of rickety barks. *Shibo? A wizard? Oh, that's rich. And no fellow of mine, I assure you. He was — I can't even call him a slave. He was more of a pet, actually. Some of his kind still run loose in the garden.*

Ji's tail stiffened. This was even worse than she'd feared. *Shibo's a monkey?*

*Was. He was until I changed him. I wanted someone I could talk with and trust, share a cup of tea with, perhaps a game of checkers —*

*Without the dishonor of having to fraternize with servants.*

Chuin's whiskery brows lifted. *Propriety must be upheld. One has a standing, you know.*

*Of course. So you used your magic to change a beast into a man. A man who turned out brighter than you'd counted on. Exactly how powerful is he?*

*Not powerful at all. The monkey spell is all he knows. It's a simple bit of working. Anyone can do it.*

*Obviously. I don't suppose there's a counterspell?*

*Of course there's a counterspell. I changed him with it, didn't I? So why haven't I used it, you're wondering now. Because the words must be spoken aloud, in a human voice. Something we're all lacking right now.* He chattered furiously, as if demonstrating. *I'm not sure he even knows the counterspell. He can't keep too much in his head.*

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He had one idea at least fixed in his head, and he'd stolen Shakaru to feed it. But later for that. *Anyone can work the spell, you said? Anyone with a human voice?*

Chuin nodded glumly. *But don't think you can trick him. I've tried. He's cunning, the wretch.*

*But if you wrote out the spell, and got someone to read it —*

*Yes, I suppose that would work. But not with Shibo. I don't even think he can read.*

*You let me worry about that part. Can you write down the spell? As you are?*

*Certainly.* Chuin rocked back on his rump and flexed his hands and feet before her face. *Quite clever, these little paws. I often envied the monkeys their dexterity —*

*Never mind that. Is there ink and paper somewhere?*

*There's ink and brushes in my study. And paper* — He waved his hand disgustedly, to indicate the papyral heaps eddying over the floor. *I daresay we'll find paper. Come with me.*

They raced to a curving marble staircase and up to the second floor. Ji shot a thought toward Shakaru. *I'll be delayed a bit*, she informed him. *I have a plan.* To Chuin she beamed, *You'd better teach me the monkey spell. It might come in handy.*

*If you think so. The words are* Ya mano hanu rii. *No gestures. Simply focus on your target. And watch the inflection.* Ya mano hanu rii. He snarled. *So simple a monkey could do it.*

Ya mano hanu rii. *Got it. And the counterspell?*

Rhimaru rhihansa. He made her repeat them both until he was satisfied with her pronunciation. By this time they had reached the wizard's study. The bamboo door hung askew. *He didn't*, Chuin said. *He wouldn't dare!*

Clearly he had. Chuin's private sanctum was a monument to a monkey's rage. Shards of shattered ceramics littered the floor. Furniture had been upended and smashed, if light enough, gouged and scraped if not. Shreds of page and parchment formed ink-stained drifts throughout the room. Over all hung the cloying stink of excrement. Ji wrinkled her muzzle. *Destructive creatures, aren't they?*

*Ungrateful beast. I'll boil the hair off him for this.* Chuin waded

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inside, hissing at each new atrocity. *My books! My scrolls!* He picked up a tattered and urine-stained parchment and screamed. *My personal memoirs!*

Ji grimly picked her way through the rubble. *You were right, finding paper won't be a problem. How about ink?*

*There ought to be ink and a brush in my desk. Assuming he's left it intact.* Chuin flung a chipped wooden figurine at the wall. It made a crash far too loud for Ji's sense of security. Chuin leaped onto a huge oaken piece that sported many drawers. *Ha! Too big for him to topple. Doesn't look as if he got into it, either.*

While Chuin rattled drawers, Ji sorted through the piles of paper on the floor, her ears twitching constantly. Chuin was making quite a bit of noise. Had Shibo heard it? Would he equate it with trouble? *Shakaru? Where are you now?*

*Heading up the stairs. The brute thinks he's heard something. Will you be implementing that plan of yours any time soon?*

*Aha!* Chuin held up a squat bottle. *Still stoppered and full! And a brush that hasn't been gnawed on. Hand me that page, would you? Good, blank on this side. I'll have the spell written out shortly — what was that?*

Ji heard it as well, the heavy slap of bare feet in the hallway. *Start writing. I'll be back in a minute.* She hoped.

She dashed into the hallway and came face-to face with Shibo, still in his mismatched armor, but now with Shakaru as well. "You! The warrior!" he yelped. How he could tell her from every other monkey in this place, Ji had no idea. "My sword! Mine now! You can't have it!" He clutched Shakaru's hilt in both hands and took a swing at her.

She hardly needed monkey agility to avoid the strike. The blade didn't even stir her fur. Shakaru sliced into the wall and stuck there. Shibo cursed and yanked at him. Shakaru released himself with no warning. Shibo tumbled backward and hit the opposite wall. He and the sword dropped, Shibo more painfully. The monkey-man swore. Shakaru lay beside him, innocent as a butter knife. Ji heard him chuckle in her mind.

*Not so easy, is it?* she thought at Shibo.

No answer. Not enough magic to hear her. She darted for Shakaru. Her paws clasped his hilt. And couldn't budge him. *Oh, bugger. You're too heavy.*

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*Of course I'm too heavy. You're a monkey now. Find a dagger or something — look out!*

She twisted in a way that would have cracked a human spine, and so missed the brunt of his punch. Still she took a glancing blow, enough to send her reeling halfway down the corridor. Shibo bounced to his feet, Shakaru once more in hand. "Kill you now!" he gloated.

Only it's one thing to pick up a soul sword, another to wield it. The soul in the blade has a mind of its own. Shakaru's hilt turned in Shibo's hand, and the edge sliced into his thigh. Shibo howled and dropped him. Shakaru landed on his foot. Shibo's howls shot up the scale. *You might want to flee,* Shakaru suggested.

*Not yet. Not without the spell.* Ji dragged herself into a crouch. *Chuin! You done yet?*

*Almost....There. Now we just have to wait for the ink to dry —*

*No time.* She shook off her grogginess as best she could and scurried back into the study. Chuin stood on the desk and waved a strip of paper back and forth in the air. *It isn't going to help us, you know. Even if he could, he wouldn't read it.*

*As long as it's dry enough not to smudge. Give it here.*

She scrambled up the side of the desk and snatched at the paper. Chuin held it out of her reach. *Not just yet, zhindi warrior. I don't trust you. First swear to me —*

The remains of the bamboo door fell away with a crash. Shibo loomed there, bleeding, red-eyed and snarling. He held Shakaru's hilt in a grip that would throttle an ox, with the blade well away from his body. His squinty glare hit Chuin. "You! Bad master! Still here? Fix that. Kill you! Kill you both!"

Chuin's tail stood straight up. He thrust the paper at Ji. *Here, take it! Save me!*

Shakaru came whistling down. Ji and Chuin dove in opposite directions. Shakaru bit into the desk and held himself fast there. *He's too stubborn to abandon me,* he beamed at Ji. *Get out of here.*

Sage advice. She hurried from the study on three legs. The fourth, her right hand, held the scrap with the spell on it. In the hallway she paused briefly to check. *Rhimaru rhihansa.* That sounded right.

Harsh rasps in the doorway alerted her. Shibo had finally worked

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Shakaru loose. What he'd done about Chuin, Ji didn't know. "Kill you!" he spat. "Kill you and the sword is mine for good!"

He tried to swing at her, but Shakaru shifted his weight and slapped against his legs. Shibo tripped and hit the floor face-first. Not for long, gods curse it. Monkey-quick, he scrambled up and launched himself at her. Ji stuck the paper in her mouth and ran flat out down the hall.

*This is karma,* she thought, *my punishment for all those monkeys I caught and ate in my girlhood.* The furious Shibo stayed on her tail no matter how hard she dodged and veered. Well, if she couldn't outrun him, perhaps she could mislead him. She leaped out the first open window she came to and swung herself onto the roof. A simple trick for her, not so easy for a man-monkey who wouldn't drop his stolen sword. His curses were shrill and quite inventive.

She paused to get her bearings. There was the rear of the house, that way lay the courtyard and the rope ladder down the cliff. A human voice, Chuin had said. There was only one left in the village. Surely the man charged with filling out the inn's daily menu would know how to write, and read.

By the time Shibo dragged himself and Shakaru onto the roof, Ji had reached the opposite end. She had no trouble clambering down to the ground. One quick dash across the courtyard toward the cliff brought her to the rope ladder. Shibo screeched and swore and jumped up and down on the tiles and jabbed Shakaru at the sky. He would follow, of course, but she had a good lead on him now. Gods of the zhindi grant it be enough.

Ji flung herself over the rim of the cliff. With hands and feet and occasionally tail she swung herself at breakneck speed down the ladder. Ten feet from the bottom she jumped, and landed on the roof of the inn. She scrabbled madly on the tiles for a moment before her paws found purchase. She clung there, panting for breath.

The ladder shuddered. Ji stared upward. Shibo crouched at the top of the cliff and glowered down at her. How had he got off the roof so fast? "Kill you!" he promised, and propelled himself down the ladder.

Ji found the kitchen by the odor of steamed pork and swung through the open window. She landed awkwardly on the counter, where the cook was chopping onions. He sprang away with a startled yip. The plump female monkey scolded her roundly.

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"Oh, it's you," the cook said. "Back so soon? Would you like something? I have apples."

Ji spat the paper strip out of her mouth and thrust it at him. He blinked at it. She waved it at his face and chattered frantically. Finally, gingerly, he took it. "What's this? Is he ordering out now?" He unfurled the strip and squinted at it. "*Rhimaru rhihansa*?" He stared at Ji. "What's a *rhimaru rhihansa*?"

His previous yip was nothing compared to the yell he loosed when Ji popped back to human form atop his counter. She slid off, brushing bits of cabbage and fish scales from her armor. "He's coming," she said, and grimaced. Her voice sounded scratchy and rough after all that screeching. "Stay behind me — "

Shibo crashed into the kitchen from the dining room. The cook and the female monkey clutched at each other. Shibo pointed Shakaru at Ji. "Got you now!"

Ji's eyes met Shibo's. *"Ya mano hanu rii!"*

And Shibo the man was gone, replaced by Shibo the monkey. Shakaru fell, not by accident, across his hindquarters. The sword's weight pinned Shibo to the floor. Ji stepped up to him. He swore at her in monkey-talk and bared his hideous teeth. Ji was an old hand at handling fractious monkeys. She caught him by the scruff of the neck, eased Shakaru aside with her foot, then lifted Shibo and thrust him into a barrel. She set a box of fish heads on the barrel's lid for good measure.

With the enemy vanquished, she picked up Shakaru. She examined his blade for signs of misuse. Other than some flecks of blood and a few monkey hairs, he was fine. *Good to have you back,* he said. *We won't even discuss your losing me in the first place. How many times do I have to remind you, arrogance is the downfall of many a —*

She shoved Shakaru into her scabbard, cutting him off. "That should take care of Lord Shibo," she told the cook. "This will take care of the others. *Rhimaru rhihansa.*"

The plump monkey in the cook's arms became a plump woman. She stared at her hands, she stared at her husband, she stared at Ji. Then she started to cry.

The cook, his arms now full of his wife, blinked owlishly at Ji. "You're a wizard too?"

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"We both are, for the moment. Read that paper at every monkey you see. Except for this one." She tapped the barrel. Shibo's muffled screech responded. "We don't want to go through that again."

"So it's over? The evil wizard's defeated?"

"One of them," Ji said. "I need to go see about the other."

JI FOUND CHUIN huddled under the desk in his study. He poked out his head, then crept into the open when he saw her. *You've done it! You've broken the spell! Then Shibo is —*

"Back in his true form." She coughed and cleared her throat. "Forgive me. I've been shouting the counterspell at every monkey in this blasted place. How many servants did you house here, anyway?"

*Enough to support a master wizard in the manner he deserves.* Chuin hopped onto a chair. *Well? What are you waiting for? Restore me!*

Ji picked up a sheet of paper, seemingly at random. "My, aren't you bossy. I can see where Shibo got his attitude. I can see where Shibo got a lot of things."

*What are you talking about? He was a monkey. I'm human. You will change me to my proper form at once.*

"No, I don't believe I will. I don't think I'd care for the sound of your voice. Why, what's this?" She showed Chuin the paper in her hand. "A map of the inner provinces? The harbor? And with all entrances and possible weaknesses so neatly marked. Looks like someone was planning to invade the City of Wonders. Wouldn't you agree?"

Chuin's whiskers quivered. He inched away. *That isn't mine.*

"Of course it isn't. It's your partner's. The warlord you've been aiding. I'm sure we'll find his army in the next valley over, where you've been shipping supplies. Assuming they're still waiting. How long were you all monkeys here?"

*That's preposterous —*

"No, that's the truth. One of your 'slaves' was an Imperial spy. Don't pull that face on me. I spoke to him downstairs. He got a warning off to us, right before you turned him into a monkey. I'll bet that's how Shibo learned the monkey spell. I understand he rarely left your side."

*Witch! When General Gao —*

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"Oh, yes. The general. I found him downstairs too. He was a bit incoherent. Screamed a lot. Kept trying to hide behind a pack of females. He even tried to bite me. He didn't mind at all when I changed him back into a monkey. He seems quite content to stay on as lord of the gardens."

Chuin made a sudden lunge for the door. Ji caught him expertly. Good to know the old skills remained keen. She held him at arm's length to avoid his flailing limbs. "You see," she went on, "I wondered where a monkey, even one in human form, would get the notion all men want is to go to war. Perhaps he'd seen a warlord? Watched an army gather? Overheard his master plot strategy with generals? And let's not forget those bright and shiny weapons, and all that pretty armor. Just like us, aren't they? So destructive. Always quick to fight." She held Chuin before her face. She wasn't smiling. "I'll give you your voice back, master traitor, in good time. You'll need it to defend yourself before the Emperor."

WITH THE VILLAGE several miles at her back, Ji finally allowed herself to relax. "I've never been so glad to leave a place," she said. She munched on a piece of spiced chicken from the box lunch thoughtfully provided by the cook. "Too bad. This is excellent."

*I imagine that inn will have all the business it can handle,* Shakaru said. *That cook is quite the hero now.*

"Yes. The man who saved his village from the wizard's monkey curse. I'm happy enough if they want to believe that. Less trouble all around. Oh," she addressed the small cage tied to her saddle, "you may want to know Shibo's all right. The cook's keeping him, as a pet for his children. They want to try to train him to serve wine to the customers. He seemed happy enough, in there with all that food. None the worse for having been human."

The cage's wizened occupant bared his teeth at her. "No comment, Lord Chuin? Ah well." She held a bit of chicken up to the bars. "Would you like a bite of this? It's very tasty."

Chuin snarled. He snatched the chicken and turned his back to her. Ji only shrugged.

*And you, little monkey,* Shakaru said. *What have you learned from this?*

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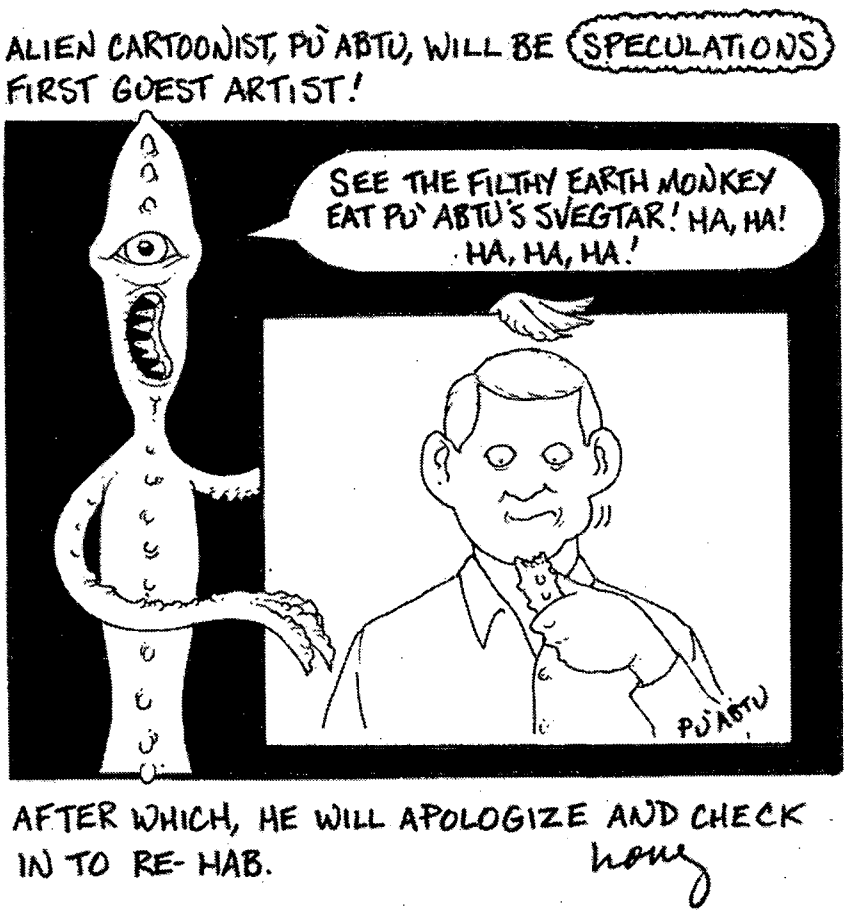
Ji rolled her eyes. "To be on my guard at all times, in all situations. Not to believe I know everything. And to always listen to my sword, no matter how much he nags and natters at me."

*I see you've learned nothing. Zhindi training never ends. The title is earned throughout a lifetime. Which is sure to be short in your case, as long as you keep —*

"Oh, do shut up," she grumbled. Perhaps the next wizard they met would know a silencing spell. She kneed her horse into a quicker gait. ॐ


ALIEN CARTOONIST, PÙ ABTU, WILL BE FIRST GUEST ARTIST!
SPECULATIONS
SEE THE FILTHY EARTH MONKEY EAT PÙ ABTU'S SVEGTAR! HA, HA! HA, HA, HA!
PÙ ABTU
AFTER WHICH, HE WILL APOLOGIZE AND CHECK IN TO RE-HAB.
Hong

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# FILMS

## LUCIUS SHEPARD

## A TALE OF TWO TURKEYS (MAYBE THREE)

IT WAS THE best of times; it was the worst of times.... No, scratch that. It was the worst of times. January at the multiplex. A time for Uwe Boll, for DOA comedies starring Ted Danson and Queen Latifah, for loser thrillers and stale action pics (can I get a *Rambo!*), and for the J. J. Abrams "high concept" film, *Cloverfield*.

For those unfamiliar with Double-J, in the early '90s he was anointed the next Steven Spielberg by those who believed that having two Spielbergs was a good thing. His early script, *Regarding Henry*, was lauded by Hollywood folk as brilliant and sensitive. It told the story of a soulless yuppie who, after taking a bullet in the head, becomes a warm, loving human being (an interesting object lesson, if not an interesting movie). Since then he's given us such treats as the Mel Gibson schmaltzfest, *Forever Young*, *Armageddon*, and *M:i:III*. He has also given us several TV series, notably *Lost*, a show that had one good season before decaying into a soap opera-ish mire of flashbacks and cryptic teases whose annoyance factor reminds me of the computer game, *Myst*, its apparent model.

From this brief resume you may reasonably assume that Abrams has never had an original thought. In keeping with this, he now brings us *Cloverfield*, a picture that apes both the viral hype and visual style of *The Blair Witch Project*. In other words, it's a movie consisting entirely of "found" camcorder footage such as might have been shot by a drunk at a barbecue (if *Blair Witch*'s jumpy camera movement nauseated you, you want to stay away from *Cloverfield*) and is prefaced by

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a block of white print on a black screen that tells us this footage was recovered from the area formerly known as Central Park, now called Cloverfield. Nothing further is offered to explain the change in designation. This was the coolest part of the movie.

Abrams has written of *Cloverfield* that "We live in a time of great fear...." and follows this heady statement by saying, "...having a movie that is about something as outlandish as a massive creature attacking your city allows people to process and experience that fear in a way that is incredibly entertaining and incredibly safe." Watching the film's debris clouds boil along Manhattan avenues, fleeing people covered in dust, and listening to cell phone calls from moms and terrified girlfriends, and so forth, I wondered if Abrams actually believes the American public has a need to find entertainment value in the agony of the thousands who suffered in 9/11, or if he understands that this is merely another means of desensitizing us. Was it his notion that the next time we confront a terrorist attack, we'll think of his movie and feel safe? Does he think his Godzilla-meets-*Felicity* (another Abrams series) scenario provides the opportunity for a meaningful dialogue about the central issue of the day? Or is this inane statement typical of a cynical exploiter who seeks to staple a mask of social commentary to his banal take on contemporary culture, populated by a twenty-something cast with the personalities of Pez dispensers, who screech and urge one another to run and say Oh God, Oh God a lot, perhaps a reaction to the fact that they're trapped in Yet Another Yuppie Swine (Which One Of Us Dies First) Movie? If the film weren't so unendingly stupid, it would have pissed me off.

*Cloverfield* is mercifully short, clocking in at a little more than seventy minutes minus its interminable end credits, and about one-fifth of that time is taken up by the opening sequence, a loft party given for Rob (Mark Stahl-David), who's soon to leave to become a VP with an unnamed multinational in Japan. Taping the proceedings and offering comic *ironic.com* asides is Rob's oafish friend Hud (T. J. Miller). Beth, Rob's ex-girlfriend (Odette Yustman), puts in an appearance to flaunt her new guy. She also turns up in snippets of the tape that Hud is shooting over, scenes from Rob-and-Beth's romance (odd, since Rob clearly has feelings for Beth — he slept with her recently). The

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ambiance is all gelled hair and lip gloss, the conversation heavy on sentences that end in "dude" and Hallmark homily. "Forget about the world and hang onto those people you love the most," advises Rob's brother Jason (Mike Vogel), who also opines that "...It's about moments, man."

Words to live by, dude.

Having introduced us to these character types (though not defining them much beyond the level of "hottie"), director Matt Reeves (*Felicity*) and screenwriter Drew Goddard (*Lost* and *Alias*) bring on explosions, fireballs shooting across the sky, the destruction of the Brooklyn Bridge, and the decapitated head of Lady Liberty lying in the street while milling New Yorkers pause to snap pictures with their phones. You can almost hear a collective, "Awesome!" This, one of *Cloverfield*'s few intriguing moments, seems to presage that the movie will examine the gimmickry of our culture, but it soon becomes evident that the entire film is a gimmick and that nothing will be examined in depth, not even the monster, a neat special effect: an enormous crustaceo-dino-beast with a whiplike tail, carrying a population of relatively tiny, lightning-fast crab-things that scoot through Manhattan, creating a more personal mayhem. Despite its uniqueness, the monster never acquires a personality as did the monster in Joon-ho Bong's *The Host*. The film is too focused upon its least developed, least compelling, most disengaging element: its human characters.

A distraught voicemail from Beth, trapped in her imperiled Columbus Circle apartment, inspires Rob to attempt a rescue, thereby making the sort of decision that anyone who has ever seen a Hollywood movie knows not to make. For all its video verité posturing, the movie is rife with such decisions (Let's go down that dark, creepy subway tunnel!), with hackneyed storytelling devices and aesthetic choices and stock bits of comic relief that dispel the illusion of realism. Accompanied by a posse of his Scooby-friends, Rob begins a trek that takes him from Spring Street to Central Park South, where the army is evacuating survivors. Included in the group is Hud, who demonstrates a zeal for recording the events of the trip that exceeds the fanatical, continuing to shoot while bridges collapse beneath him and his friends bleed out and die.... This snaps the last thread suspending one's disbelief.

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The Brooklyn Bridge has taken a beating lately. Dispatched by a mighty whack of a monster's tail in *Cloverfield* and, a month earlier, blown up to prevent the infected from leaving Manhattan in *I Am Legend*. Purportedly a fourth remake of Richard Matheson's short novel, *Legend* is actually a remake of 1971's *The Omega Man*, with Will Smith's guilt-riddled, despairing Dr. Robert Neville replacing Charlton Heston's macho, macho man. Francis Lawrence, who directed the underrated *Constantine*, keeps things rolling for the first hour — a neat trick considering that hour is all setup — and Smith does a credible job of carrying the picture. His Neville is a military scientist whose family died in a worldwide pandemic that killed most of humanity, a viral cancer-cure gone horribly wrong. Most of the survivors have been transformed into super-strong, super-fast creatures of the night, bloodthirsty mutants that are allergic to sunlight. Only a very few, like Neville, have complete immunity. As far as he knows, he may be the last man on Earth.

Neville has carved out an efficient survivalist life, collecting corn from a field in Central Park, hunting for game with his dog Sam, working in his basement lab to find a cure, experimenting on mutants that he traps like animals; but his sanity is eroding. He has begun, for instance, to have relationships edging toward the delusional with the mannequins he's placed in a video store. At night, locked away in his Washington Square stronghold, he curls up in his bathtub with a rifle, while the mutants hunt and howl outside. Into his life come a young woman (Alice Braga) and a child (Charlie Tahan) whose purpose, it seems, is merely to serve as a plot device and to point up the extent of Neville's erosion.... And then the movie ends. It jumps from early in the second act to the climactic events.

Though the mutants were a letdown, bad CGI rendering them as video game ghoulies crossed with the zombies of *28 Days Later*, the setup had been handled with such care, the atmospherics of a deserted Manhattan accomplished with such painstaking detail and to such poignant effect, I was settling in for what promised to be another entertaining hour, and bam! Everything wrapped with unseemly haste, as if the director and cast had somewhere else to be or maybe the screenwriter ran out of paper. Lately, having a good setup and no third act has

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become an inexplicable trend in Hollywood. (*Michael Clayton*, for example, had a similar structure, yet few seemed bothered—it earned improbable Oscar nominations for, among others, Best Picture and Best Original Screenplay.) It's hard to believe nobody noticed this. Perhaps they just don't care, perhaps when a film reaches a predetermined limit of ninety or a hundred twenty minutes, they just slap a sticker on it and shove it out the door. Yet at the same time there is a contrary trend: many studio films these days run to two and a half hours. Oh, well. These mysteries will endure — we can but ponder them. Whatever the case, I'd rather sit through a bad movie than be frustrated by half a decent one.

*The Orphanage*, directed by first-timer Juan Antonio Bayona and written by Sergio G. Sánchez, is another flawed movie; yet its flaws don't necessarily prevent you from having a good time at the theater. In a creepy, creaky, many-celled monster of a house in northern Spain, Laura (Belén Rueda), her husband, and her son Simon pass their days in pleasant solitude. The house once was used as an orphanage where Laura spent her youth, and her husband plans to reopen it as a home for special-needs children. Simon, a lonely kid, has become so obsessed with his imaginary friends Watson and Pepe that Laura has begun to worry about him. When she takes a walk with him one day to the cliffs overlooking the sea, she loses him in a cave; when he reappears, he seems to have acquired several more imaginary friends, and that ignites the terrifying engine of the plot and stirs into action the evil of the place.

Bayona knows how to create mood and build suspense and he also knows how to scare the hell out of you—I must have had seven or eight moments when I scooted lower in my chair, bracing my knees against the seat in front of me, realizing he was about to get me...and he got me, anyway. Got me good. As a ghost story, *The Orphanage* is a heart-stopper. You're right with Laura as she gradually comes to recognize the peril in which she's put her family. And though he's a bit of a cliché, that kid with the gunny sack over his head whom you may have seen in the previews, he'll stick with you a while. The problem is that the movie's tropes—hidden crimes, foggy lighthouses, lost children, etc. — are overly familiar, and its influences too much in view. Bayona appears to quote from every director in the Spanish new wave, especially from

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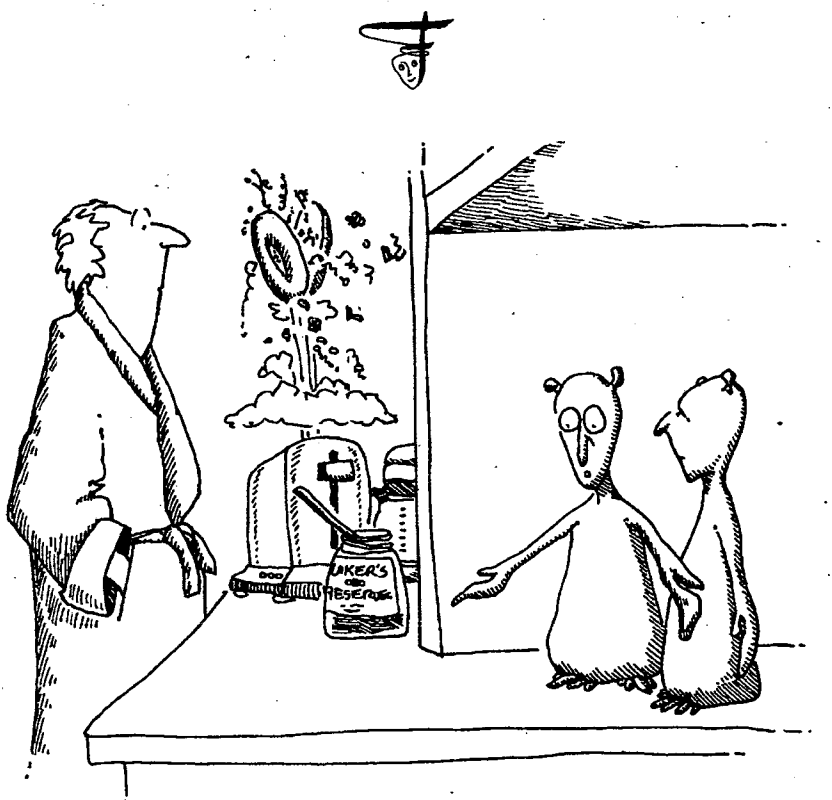
Amenábar and from his producer and mentor, Guillermo del Toro, whose favorite themes and stylistic tricks can be seen throughout; and he quotes from other directors as well, memorably from Don Siegel's *The Beguiled*, Charles Laughton's *Night of the Hunter*, and Jack Clayton's *The Innocents*, a film that I suspect has been shown frequently in Spanish film schools during the last few decades. If you can go past this off-putting display of the familiar and let yourself be drawn in by the power of Rueda's performance (and it is a truly noteworthy, awards-caliber performance), you'll have a hell of a ride.




*"Yes! The transdimensional torus! I parked it right here."*

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*Rand B. Lee has lived in northern New Mexico for more than twenty years. He says that a week after he completed "Litany," he encounterd a black and white dog with three legs. The dog went right up to Mr. Lee and began to lick his face. The dog's owner said "He's usually extremely reserved with men."*

*Coincidence, or evidence that there are forces at work we do not comprehend?*

# Litany

## *By Rand B. Lee*

1.

THE SIGN ON THE DOOR said "La Llorona Realty" in ornate gold scrollwork, and when the tall, gray-eyed man pushed the door open, a bell tinkled somewhere. The room he walked into was small, with a glass-topped coffee table at one end surrounded by overstuffed chairs in faux black leather. A neat stack of glossy real estate magazines stood on the table, centered precisely. A slim young Hispano was seated behind a reception desk, typing on a laptop. Behind him was a large glass window, against which had been parked a coffee trolley outfitted with a gleaming espresso machine. Through the window, the gray-eyed man could see another office: large wooden desk, several chairs, posters, filing cabinets, the back of the semitransparent pastel shell of a computer terminal. The receptionist looked up from his desk. "May I help you?" he asked.

"My name is Anderssen. I have a ten o'clock appointment to see Ms. Vigil." He pronounced it correctly: vee-HEEL. The slim young man smiled. His black hair was cut fashionably and lightly frosted, and his eyes flicked over the gray-eyed man's body with nearly imperceptible rapidity.

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"Roberta's been delayed a couple of minutes, Mr. Anderssen. She's just on her way from showing a house out on Avenida La Llorona. She should be here any second. Please have a seat." The boy waved a languid hand toward the overstuffed chairs. "My name is David. I'm Roberta's personal assistant. Would you like some coffee while you wait?"

"That would be fine," said the gray-eyed man. The receptionist stood up and busied himself with the espresso machine. His pants were tailored, and just tight enough at the buttocks to advertise without offending. *Seventh Circle*, thought the man who called himself Anderssen. Seating himself, he said to the boy's back, "This is a beautiful little town you've got here. The red hills, the pines, the brilliance of the sunlight." He had a rich tenor, an actor's voice, with a slight accent that the boy could not place.

"It has its points," said the receptionist without turning around.

"It reminds me a bit of Toscano."

"Oh? Where's that?"

"Tuscany. In Italy," the gray man added gently.

The back of the boy's slim neck reddened. He threw a chagrined grin at the gray-eyed man over his shoulder, his two black eyes bright and birdlike. "I knew that," he said. "Single or double?"

"Single is fine."

"Milk, cream, or soy milk?"

"Black, please."

"Flavorings? We have almond, orange, cinnamon, and chocolate."

"None for me, thanks. Your espresso bar comes very well equipped."

"It gets us through the day," said the boy cheerfully. "And our clients like it." He turned away again and busied himself with bottles and dials. The gray-eyed man let his gaze wander again around the office. It had the look of recent remodeling and painstaking care: the wainscoting was new, the heavy sunblocker curtains lining the storefront plate glass window free from the ubiquitous northern New Mexico dust. *Recent prosperity, then*, thought the gray-eyed man. Then he noticed that the beige lamb's-wool carpet was very slightly frayed along one edge, and he added, *Or a show of same.*

The espresso machine began to hiss. The gray-eyed man said, "I'm looking forward to moving into my rental as soon as possible."

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"Which rental would that be?" asked the boy casually.

"Number Seven Avenida Corazón is the address your boss mentioned."

"Oh, yes. The old Schmidt place. Roberta said someone was taking it." The fragrance of coffee began leaking into the air. The gray-eyed man heard the clink of glass.

"Your tone suggests you don't think much of it."

The boy's neck flushed again. "Oh, no! It's a very nice older property." When the receptionist turned around again, his face was carefully neutral. He came out from behind the desk carrying the steaming espresso cup in one hand and a ceramic trivet in the other. He placed the trivet before the man on the glass-topped table and set the coffee cup carefully upon it. "There you go."

"Thank you."

The office door opened suddenly, with a clash of bells, and a woman rushed in breathlessly, carrying a briefcase and a coat. She was short, a trifle plump, with a round pleasant face. The young man brightened. "There she is! Roberta, this is Mr. Anderssen. Your ten o'clock?"

"Hello, hello! I'm so sorry I'm late." She had nearly olive skin, and high cheekbones inherited from some Indian ancestor. Her black hair, which fell to below her shoulders, was very slightly mussed, and one lapel of her conservative navy blue suit jacket was turned up. She hurried across the carpet toward the gray-eyed man, transferring her coat to her briefcase hand and extending the other. "Roberta Vigil, Mr. Anderssen. Welcome to La Llorona! So nice to meet you face to face at last! You've met David, I see. Did you have any trouble finding us?"

"None at all. Your directions were excellent." The gray-eyed man had risen, and as he reached out his own long-fingered hand to meet hers he steeled himself for what he knew was to come. Their hands met, shook, and parted, two or three seconds of contact, no more; but in those few instants, everything she was flowed into him, and he knew her utterly, down to her tiniest mitochondrion. He knew her cancers, the ones the doctors had excised and the ones they had missed; he knew her pregnancies, the two that had miscarried and the secret third she had had, in an agony of guilt, aborted; he knew what her ex-husband had done to her the night before she had finally decided to press charges; he knew what the

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boys had done to her behind her fifth grade classroom; and he knew her true Name.

In the beginning, long before, such a transfer would have laid him out cold for three days at a stretch. Now he felt only a brief wave of dizziness, swiftly past. But she snatched her hand from his with a startled cry.

"Yikes!" She shook her wrist, grimacing ruefully. "This darn carpet! Come on in, Mr. Anderssen, and we'll get you sorted out in a jiffy." She led the way past the reception desk, unlocked her office door, and bustled in before him. The contrast between the state of her office and that of the reception area was marked. The desk was old, nicked and scarred; the cabinets secondhand; the chairs tubular aluminum with vinyl back and seat pads; the tops of the bookshelves gray with dust. There was a sofa covered in once-blonde pseudoleather. And there was clutter everywhere: books, papers, file folders, half-open boxes of color brochures. "Forgive the mess. Any order this office possesses is David's doing, but he's forbidden entry to my Fortress of Solitude."

She slung her coat onto a rack-peg and plopped her case onto her desk, sending a sheaf of papers sliding to the floor. Crouching swiftly, she gathered them up, saying, "Please have a seat, Mr. Anderssen. You mentioned wanting to take possession immediately?"

"If that would be convenient." The gray-eyed man sat down on one of the vinyl-covered chairs and placed his hands on his knees. She glanced at him out of the corner of her eye. He was, she decided, handsome in a patrician way, with a long lean face to match his long lean body. She liked his gray eyes, and his hair, which was also gray, fine-textured and cut very short. He wore a light dove-colored linen suit of European cut, expensive, she thought, but no designer labels obviously showing, and no jewelry. So he wasn't some insecure nouveau riche. His shirt was of some roughly woven fabric, hemp, maybe, or bamboo fiber, and its cuffs did not reach all the way to his wrists, which stuck out from his jacket sleeves, showing glinting golden hairs. *Beautiful hands,* she thought. An artist's hands, or a surgeon's. She was a sucker for nice hands.

She wondered what he did for a living. The rent she was charging him for the Schmidt place was twice what she would have charged a local, and he had accepted her terms without hesitation, transferring three months'

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advance rent plus substantial damage deposit for the Schmidt place sight unseen to her company account from a bank in North Carolina. But his accent wasn't East Coast, and his manner was restrained to the point of shyness. Trust-funder, maybe; the hills around Santa Fé were full of them, Anglo refugees from rich families or failed coastal marriages, seeking off the beaten track some El Dorado of peace and healing they imagined they couldn't find elsewhere. Of course, he could also be Hollywood. The northern New Mexico film industry was burgeoning, offering substantial perks and savings to companies willing to employ local actors and techies. *That's it,* she thought. *He's here scouting locations.* Or maybe he was a writer finishing up a script. But what was a Hollywood type doing driving an old Subaru?

What she said was, "I've got your keys right here." She unlocked a drawer of her desk, rummaged around, pulled out an envelope and handed it over. His beautiful fingers received it from her gracefully, but she noticed that he was careful not to make skin contact again. She added brightly, "Now are you certain you don't want to follow me over to the property? In case, you know, in case something isn't quite right, in case there's something you need moved, or changed in some way? It's furnished very simply, as you specified, but, you know, some of our clients are particular, and I'd like you to be happy with us." Amusement flitted across his features. She thought sourly, *Great going, Roberta. You just called him a fussbudget.*

"If the digitals you sent me were accurate, I'm sure everything will be just fine," said the gray-eyed man. "My own things will be arriving in a day or so. I'll let you know if there's a problem." He stood up and gazed down at her, and to her horror she found herself staring up at him with her mouth open. His eyes were not just pretty. There was something — not *compelling* about them, exactly; and certainly not at all seductive — something *big* about them. No, not big. What was the word? She was good at words, she was an ace at crossword puzzles; she did them in ink and won most every Scrabble game she played. *Spacious.* That was it. There was something *spacious* about his eyes, vast and safe at the same time. You could fall into their gray and not be scared for a moment. Then she was staring at his back as her office door closed behind him.

* * *

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She had told him to cross the river, go up the hill to the four-way stop, make a right onto the County Road, go straight for half a mile ("Watch out for the dip"), make a left after the arroyo, and go on up past the turquoise Senior Center trailer till he saw the compound with all the barking dogs in it. The next right after that, she said, was Avenida Corazón. "Only sometimes the sign's there, sometimes it's not. The high school kids sometimes take it." The sign was there that day. Avenida Corazón turned out to be a deeply rutted red mud track, surfaced liberally with loose stones and gravel in many sizes, shapes, and colors. He eased the car around its many bends, wincing as the stones bumped against the undercarriage. He passed only one house, on the right, a characterless prefab surrounded by seven-foot chainlink barren of vines. There was a purple trampoline in the yard and three mismatched child's shoes.

Then the Subaru passed through a wired-open metal gate, and his new refuge stood before him. It looked exactly the way it had in the digitals: small, part-trailer, part-house, with big front windows, brown louvered wooden blinds, and a tiny fenced yard. A small shed stood nearby, shaded by an ailing cottonwood; from one of the branches an empty plastic bird feeder hung forlornly. Beyond the circular drive, native clump grasses showed broad patches of raw red earth between them; there were a few old tires here and there, half-obscured by weeds; and beyond that, dark fragrant hummocks of old piñons and taller junipers, widely interspaced.

He pulled the car into the gravel siding, turned off the motor, and got out. The afternoon was perfectly still. In the distance, the jagged hills showed purple. Along the river, he had seen pastures dotted with horses and cows, and on the highway up from Santa Fé there had been a fair amount of traffic. But out here there was nothing but stillness, and he took deep breaths of it, wondering.

He went up onto the lattice-covered porch. There were two doors: the outer, screened, and the inner, plate glass and metal. Holding the first door open with his left hand, with his right he fitted into the locks the key that the Vigil woman had given him. As he did, a swift shadow passed by outside overhead: a raven, chasing something. He tensed, preparing the Word; but it was just a raven, and it flew on without glancing in his direction. He relaxed, pulled open the inner door, and stepped up into the entry room.

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It was full of windows and very sunny, the walls painted cream to match the oatmeal-colored carpet. The adjoining kitchen and breakfast room had more windows, more of the same carpeting, and a skylight. An open archway led two steps down into a sunken living room, also carpeted, where his office would be. There was a propane heater against one wall, and a little fireplace. A hard right brought him into a wood-floored hallway, with a door straight ahead leading him through a full bath into the bedroom at the back of the house. Another door, to the right of the hall, took him into the carpeted laundry room.

He began to relax. Nothing seemed amiss, nothing out of place, nothing out of the ordinary. *A good place*, he decided, and turned to walk back into the kitchen.

*And he is there once again on the burning plain, stars falling around him, the Terrible Word which he has just spoken spreading out from him in all directions. In the endless black sky, galaxies burn. He hears their screams of anguish in the radio frequencies, in the infrared, in the subquanta, and he feels no pity for them at all.*

## 2.

WHEN HE CAME BACK to himself, he was lying on the floor in the middle of the entry room to the little brown house. Raising himself onto his elbows, he looked out of the window and saw two burly men with caps on their heads shading their eyes to peer in at him. Behind them stood a moving van. One of the men was tapping on the glass, which was the sound that had awakened him. He got to his feet unsteadily. His head ached. "Sorry, sorry," he said through the glass. "I'm coming."

Going to the door, he found it unlocked. He opened it, pushed the screen door outward, and nearly fell onto the porch. "Sorry," he said to the men. "I must have dozed off. Ah. You're my movers, of course. Sorry." The men exchanged oh-Christ-not-another-drunk looks.

"Mister Anderssen?" one of them said, reading from a shipping manifest.

"That's right. Sorry. I didn't hear you knocking."

"Your real estate agent told us where to find you. Sorry we're so late. We tried to call, but there was no answer at your number."

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"Are you late?" the gray-eyed man asked in surprise. The men exchanged glances again.

"Only by about two days," drawled the one who had not yet spoken.

*Two days*? thought the gray-eyed man. *This was a bad one, then.* "No problem. Um, let's get to it, then."

"You sure you're okay?" asked the first man. "When we saw you on the floor, we thought you might be sick or something. We were going to call nine-one-one."

"Just give him the papers, Robert," said the other man.

"Okay, okay," said Robert, frowning. He handed the gray-eyed man a clipboard with a multipage carbon form attached. "This here lists what we got. We guarantee no breakage en route. If you wouldn't mind just checking stuff off as we bring it out."

"Yes. Thank you." In fact there was not much to unload, considering that the truck's contents constituted the gray-eyed man's entire earthly possessions: his computer equipment; three boxes of books; some kitchen things; a folding modular wooden office table; an office chair on casters; two trunks of clothes. To have had a spell here, now, so soon after his arrival, meant he had chosen correctly. He was close to the Key, close to the end of his long search. Which meant that the Rabbi was near.

After the men had unloaded the van, and he had paid them, and they had fled (a bad moment when he had been forced to shake hands with the nice one, and the shock of contact had literally made the man's hair stand on end), he dialed the real estate office. The young man, David, answered in a silky voice. "La Llorona Realty."

"David, this is Anderssen on Corazón. May I speak to Roberta, please?"

"I'm so sorry; she's out on call."

"When do you expect her back?"

"Not until three, I'm afraid. Can I take a message? Everything all right at the house? The movers came by this morning. We were all a bit concerned when you didn't answer the phone." He did not sound as though he had been concerned.

"Everything's fine here," the gray-eyed man said. "Perhaps you can tell me: Does La Llorona have a historical society?"

"Historical society?" Someone giggled in the background.

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"A formal or informal body," said the gray-eyed man dryly, "the purpose of which is to collect, preserve, codify, and disseminate data related to the founding and history of the town."

"Um," said David. "There's Mrs. Roybal on Loma Vista. People are always calling her up asking about the town. Stop that," he added.

"Pardon?"

"Sorry. I wasn't speaking to you."

"Perhaps," said the gray-eyed man slowly, "I've phoned at an inconvenient time." There was a short silence. Then he said, "You don't happen to have Mrs. Roybal's telephone number, do you?"

"One moment." The line went dead, and stayed dead for a long time. He was just about to disconnect when the line came to life again. "Sorry to have kept you waiting," said David. He sounded breathless. "Do you have a pen?" The boy gave him the number and hung up. When the gray-eyed man dialed the number he had been given, a recording said the number he had reached was no longer in service, and that if he thought he had reached this recording in error to please hang up and try again.

Sighing, he dialed directory assistance, and they gave him the same number the boy had given him. When he told the operator about the recording, she dialed for him and got the recording, too. "Sorry about that. Is there anything else I can help you with?" she asked.

"No, thank you," he said. By that time he was already locking the house door behind him. He got into the car and set out to find Loma Vista Street.

The house of Adelina Roybal was set back from the lane, half-hidden behind a high wooden fence. The driveway held a small red Toyota, its visible fender slightly dented. He got out of his car. Dogs barked in the house. The street appeared empty — it was, after all, the middle of a working day — but experience had shown him that this did not mean he was not being observed. So he was careful to keep his movements slow and his bearing relaxed as he walked up to the fence. Above the fence's gate a bell hung, its clapper-cord dangling. He sounded the clapper three times and stepped back to wait.

The dogs stopped barking at once, but nothing else happened for a long time. Then he heard someone say, quite close by, "Coming," in a strong woman's voice. There was a clatter from the other side of the gate.

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It was pulled open suddenly to reveal the unlined oval face of a very short, very old woman. "Well, now," she said, looking him up and down. Her eyes were bright. "And what are *you* selling, young man?" She was dressed in a blue painter's smock and jeans. Her hair was long and silver, caught up in a ponytail; she had a smudge of red paint on the bridge of her long, narrow nose.

He said, "Mrs. Adelina Roybal? I'm Rafael Anderssen. I tried calling, but the phone company says your number is out of service."

"What can I do for you, Mr. Anderssen?" She was peering around him. "I don't see anybody else with you, so you can't be a Mormon or a J. W. They always travel in pairs. Are you from Fuller Brush? I see no sample case. They always used to send around the nicest young men, and their goods were top quality, but of course that was many years ago."

"I'm a writer, Mrs. Roybal. I've just moved to La Llorona, and I'm doing some research. You were recommended to me as someone who knew a lot about the history of the area. May I make an appointment to chat with you? I'd be happy to reimburse you for your time," he added.

"A writer! My, my," the old woman said. She smiled suddenly and blindingly, and he saw her as she had been when she was young. *They live such a short time*, he thought. "It's been a while since one of you folks came to see me. This isn't a book about La Llorona, is it?" she added, frowning.

"About the town? No, not exactly."

"I didn't mean the town. I meant the woman after whom the town is named."

"The Weeping Woman," he said. "Said to be seen on the side of the road late at night. A local version of the Irish banshee."

"You scoff. But she's real, Mr. Anderssen. I've seen her. My nephews have seen her." She drew herself up. "You're not *that* kind of writer, are you, Mr. Anderssen? What do they call themselves? Debunkers? Because if you are, I have no interest in further dealings with you. Stupid men — almost always men — pretentious, intellectually arrogant, angry with their religious fanatic mothers or the nuns who taught them when they were in grade school, frightened deep down that there *is* a spiritual reality, so they spend their lives attacking other people's faith. Are you that kind of writer?"

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"No, ma'am," he said. "Far from it." He could barely speak. For he knew he was standing in the presence of the Rabbi at last.

## 3.

THE OLD WOMAN'S HOUSE was cluttered and cool and full of plants in pots. She took him into the kitchen, put a teapot on the stove, took a tin of cookies out of the refrigerator, and soon they were sitting together at her kitchen table, chatting like old friends. "You going to tape this?" she asked him.

"I'll remember," he said, smiling. "I remember everything."

"That could be a blessing," she observed. "Or not." And when he did not reply, she nodded, and began to talk.

The community had not been called La Llorona originally. Originally, it had not been a community at all. "Back in the 1850s and '60s, this whole area belonged to the Varelas," the old woman told him. "It was part of their ranch. Old Man Varela was a bit of an eccentric. When the railroad came through, he wouldn't let them build on his land; he thought trains were of the Devil. As a result, the railroad bypassed us, went around Glorieta and Pecos way up to Las Vegas. When Varela passed on, his sons tried to get the railroad to run a side rail out this way, but nothing doing. Those boys were fit to be tied, let me tell you. They saw how the communities around them were prospering, and they wanted in, Devil or no Devil."

"What happened?" asked the gray-eyed man. The cookies were shortbread, dusted with powdered sugar, like the *kourabiedes* he had enjoyed in Athens.

"Nothing much till Doc Wilberforce and his wife Socorro moved up here in the 1880s. He was from Chicago originally. She was from Chalapa, México. He'd met her working as a domestic for a whiskey importer; fell in love with her. But interethnic marriages were pretty uncommon in those days, in the East at any rate, and she was lonesome for folks who spoke her language, I guess, so he decided to seek their fortunes elsewhere. Go West, young man, go West."

"What was he doctor of?"

"Nothing much, as far as I can make out. Lots of people called

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themselves 'doctor' in those days. He *did* go to medical school for a few years — I ran across some documentation via the Internet just last summer that confirmed it. But he never graduated and certainly never practiced." She shrugged. "That didn't stop him from coming out here and proclaiming himself a *curandero*."

"A folk healer?"

"Traditional medicine person," she corrected him. "Herbs, charms, prayers, acts of contrition, patent remedies, some of which he brewed up himself and bottled in recycled whiskey flasks."

"How did the locals react?"

"Mostly ignored him," she said cheerfully. "After all, they had their own *curandera*: my great-great-grandma, Esperanza. But Doña Varela, Old Man Varela's widow, she'd had a falling out with my ancestor over something or other, and one day she sent for the new guy and told him to do his thing. Whatever he did, it worked, and she took him on as her regular physician.

"That did it. Lots of people in the villages around here heard and figured if he was good enough for Doña Rosaura, he should be good enough for them. In those days, remember, wealth was seen as a blessing from God; a holdover from feudal days, I suppose.

"And having Socorro there definitely helped. Socorro acted as his nurse. Her presence reassured folks that there would be no impropriety going on in Doc's consulting room. And since his Spanish wasn't so hot, at least at first, she was able to translate for customers, which helped business a lot. He started a regular route through the hills here, stopping at homesteads and such, selling his remedies and attending to people's aches and pains and fears. Drove a wagon drawn by an albino burro." To his laugh of disbelief, she nodded vigorously. "Truth of God, I swear! That burro lived to be eighty-seven years old. Got killed by a mountain lion in 1952."

"Eighty-seven?"

"I swear. I have photocopies of the vet's affidavit to prove it. Hell, my daddy remembered the old girl. Ornery as all get out. I've always meant to do a study on the link between longevity and cussedness."

The tall man laughed and took another cookie. "How did the town become a town?"

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"Well, the only reason it *could* be a town at *all* was the Agua Azul. We call it a river, but it's really just a big stream, a tributary of the Pecos. Still, it seldom dries up, and that's one of the reasons Old Man Varela didn't want the railroad coming through here. He was afraid it would poison the water somehow and harm his stock. Well, Doc Wilberforce got the idea there was some sort of healing property in that stream — it *is* very blue — and began bottling the water to sell to Easterners coming through. And the success of *that* gave him the idea of building a spa on the Varela property. You got to take your hat off to him; the man had marketing savvy.

"Well, he approached Doña Varela and she said nothing doing; she was afraid he'd leave her, you see, for bigger and better things. She'd gotten completely dependent upon him emotionally, you see. And she was nearly ninety by that time, almost blind. You can't blame her, really. Her sons, though, were a different matter. I don't think they believed in Doc's putative healing powers for one second. But they believed in his salesmanship. And they saw in his spa plan a way of augmenting their revenues from the family cattle business. So they agreed to finance the project with the help of their pals at the bank in Las Vegas. And they did."

"They built the spa? Does it still exist?"

"No, no. It was torn down in the '40s. But for about thirty years it was a famous little place, almost as famous as that Kellogg sanitarium back East. Folks came from as far away as Fort Carson to take the waters. Part of the reason for its success, of course, was the timing. The nation as a whole was prospering. World War One was still some years off, most of the Indians had been cleared out of the area or parlayed into more or less peaceful coexistence; the Southwest was generally less dangerous to travel in." She sipped her tea reflectively. "And with the fame of the spa came the railroad, and with the railroad came the town."

"So they did finally run a side rail out here?"

"They finally did. And the night after they cut the golden cord proclaiming the opening of the spur, Eusebio, Old Man Varela's eldest son, who'd been the main one pushing all these deals through, got drunk and went for a ride alone under the moon. When he came back the next morning, he was nearly incoherent. He'd seen her, of course."

"Whom?" he asked, though he knew.

"La Llorona. Walking in her shawl and long dress along the bank of the

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Azul in the moonlight. Weeping and wailing like death to come." She got up to refill the teapot.

"Let me," he said. She sank back down in her chair. As he worked he said, "Do you think he really had a vision?"

"Aided and abetted by his guilt over betraying his daddy's wishes, maybe. And fueled by his alcohol-induced altered state. But sure, why not? Sometimes you got to get drunk to open to God." Watching his shoulders, she laughed. "Doesn't sit well with you, what I just said?"

"It's not that." He set the refilled teapot back on the stove, lit the gas burner. "I wish I *could* get drunk."

"You a teetotaler?"

"No. I just can't get drunk." He shrugged, smiling. "Alcohol doesn't affect me. Pot doesn't, either. My system refuses to shut down." He thought of the vision of the burning plain. "Ordinarily," he added.

She observed him for a moment, then said, "Whatever he saw, it changed him, old Eusebio. He was around sixty at the time, still something of a hellraiser, long lapsed from the Church, much to the despair of his extremely long-suffering wife, who had spent a small fortune on novenas trying to get him to come around. Well, he did come around, finally. Paid off his mistress of eighteen years, sent her packing to Lamy. Started paying the hands better wages. Acknowledged three bastard kids he'd insisted for years weren't his; took 'em on as hands, gave 'em the opportunity to be part of a family again."

"His wife couldn't have liked *that* very much."

"Actually, she was okay with it, I think. She'd never been able to have kids of her own. And the boys took to her. Two of 'em ended up as priests, would you believe it? And the town — Doc Wilberforce had originally wanted to call it 'Villa Varela,' out of flattery to the family, but Eusebio put his foot down and said no, it's La Llorona. So they drew up a charter and everything. And La Llorona it is to this day."

The teapot started to sing. The tall man turned off the heat, went over to the table, poured hot water into their two empty cups, dropped in the teabags ("Lipton?" "Hey, don't look a gift horse in the mouth, Mr. Anderssen. If Lipton was good enough for Jesus, it's good enough for you."), and sat back down at the table again. "What happened to him? Eusebio?"

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"He died in 1919."

"The flu epidemic?"

She nodded. His mind filled up with images: women in long dresses with masks on their faces; bodies piling up in carts; smoke at the edge of town. "That couldn't have been very good for spa business."

"On the contrary, Mister Anderssen. Business took off as never before. And of course the war was done by that time. Fact is," she said, removing the teabag from her cup and dipping it once, twice, three times, "fact is, Eusebio Varela was the only one."

"The only one who what?"

"The only one in La Llorona," she said, "who died of the flu."

He stared at her. "You're joking."

"I don't joke about things like this," she said quietly. She put the teabag back on its saucer and looked him in the eye. "Call it coincidence. Maybe there really *is* something special in the water of the Agua Azul. Or maybe those New Agers we had come through here last spring were right, and there's some kind of energy vortex that protects this place, you know, like the ones they're supposed to have up in whatchahoozy. But whatever the explanation, while the epidemic hit all the major towns around here — Albuquerque, Santa Fé, Las Vegas, Española, Glorieta — it didn't take hold in La Llorona. Except in one man, in one night."

He nodded. "La Llorona's curse."

"La Llorona's curse. Though why she'd have wanted to curse him when he'd gone to so much trouble to clean up his act, I sure couldn't say. Spirits," she added, "are notoriously inconsistent in their morals, don't you find, Mister Anderssen? Sort of like people."

He sighed and sipped his tea. "May I have just one more of those incredible cookies?" he asked. She laughed and pushed the plate over.

"Help yourself. You're too skinny; need some meat on those bones." Very quickly, before he could change his mind, he reached out and took her hand in his. She was surprised; she raised her eyebrows. But she did not try to pull away. In a moment he let her go.

For nothing had happened. No shock of information, no past-life replay, no cellular-level data-flooding, no precognitive waves. He could not read her at all.

He stood up. She remained sitting, following him with her calm eyes.

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He said, "Your family. They weren't *conversos*, by any chance, were they? Way back when?"

"Now how in Heaven's name did you know that?" She was frankly staring now. "Yes, they were. Well, on my mother's side, at any rate. Back in Spain, Sephardic Jews. We converted to Catholicism, the alternative being unacceptably unpleasant. As it is, they confiscated our lands anyway." She cocked her head. "Is that what you're writing about? The crypto-Jews of the Southwest? You *are* writing a book, aren't you, Mister Anderssen?"

"No," he blurted. "No. And I — and I have to go now. You've been very kind."

"Are you all right?" she exclaimed, for as he moved toward her door, a wave of dizziness hit him, and he nearly stumbled. *Not now! Not here!* he thought, and, gathering his will, spoke a True Word. At once strength flowed back into him, and he straightened. "Are you all right?" she said again.

"Low blood sugar," he said.

"After all those cookies?"

"I've got to go. Mrs. Roybal, you've been enormously helpful. Oh, I forgot." He opened his wallet, took out some bills, set them on the tabletop. "I hope this is enough. And I hope I may come back again." He managed a smile. "I can't tell you how much I've enjoyed this conversation."

She did not glance at the money. She rose and came over to him. He closed his eyes, afraid the dizziness would strike again, but it did not. She did not touch him. She said, "I'm no *curandera*, Mister Anderssen, and it's none of my business. But whatever's really brought you to La Llorona, my advice, which you haven't asked for, is to take it slow." He opened his eyes, blinked at her through sudden tears. "Just take it slow. You've got time, all right? You've got time."

On the drive home he was conscious of being possessed by a powerful excitement, so as he piloted the old Subaru through the dusty La Llorona streets he concentrated upon controlling his breath to calm himself down. Too much excitement could be dangerous at this stage. If, as seemed the case, he had found the Rabbi in her current incarnation, then the others would not be far off either in space or time: the Lamp, who would illumine

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the Way to the Door; the Sacrifice, whose blood would purchase access to the Way; the Key to the Door, which could be a thing, an animal, or a human being; the Door itself. And of course the Enemy and the Traitor would not be far behind, if indeed they were not here already.

He would have to be very careful from now on. It was so peaceful up here in the mountains, such a relief after the craziness of Paris and London and New York; and the countryside around La Llorona reminded him keenly of the region of Northern Italy where he had first dwelt after the Seven brought him through the veil into flesh. *Everything is a circle*, he thought. But he must remain alert. The Traitor would lead the Enemy to him, late or soon but inevitably; it was all part of the dance. And when that happened, he must be ready.

## 4.

"SO WHO WAS THAT?" asked the naked backpacker.

David yawned. He was sore all over, but Jesus! Nobody had ever made him feel this way before. Nobody. At first he had felt weird about using the office as a place to play with his exciting new friend, but there hadn't been any other place to go. David couldn't have taken him into the home of his *abuela*, his grandmother with whom he'd lived since he was a baby; she was a really strict Catholic, she didn't know he was gay, and he was sure if she ever found out she'd have a total heart attack on the spot. And his new friend didn't have a place; he was backpacking around the Southwest. So the office had seemed like the logical option.

And David had to confess to himself that the possibility, however remote, that Roberta might come back from her house-showing early — might walk in on them and catch them in the act — had added to the excitement of the afternoon's encounter.

It was strange how they'd connected, too. Almost as though it had been meant. David had been in the general store getting some stuff for his *abuela*, and he'd glanced over just in time to see the young blond backpacker take some Slim Jims and put them in the pocket of his Army jacket. The guy had seen him see him steal, too, and had the backpacker

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freaked? No way. Cool as could be he'd given David a long up-and-down appraisal, then *winked* at him, turned, gone up to the counter, paid for a Coke he'd grabbed from the cold case, and sauntered out with a glance over his shoulder in David's direction. His heart racing, David had followed as quickly as he had been able.

Outside he'd looked around for the youth. At first he hadn't seen him, and he'd felt keen disappointment. A new face in this butthole of a town, and he'd seemed interested, and now he was gone! Dejected, David had returned to his car, and was just unlocking the car doors when he heard a husky voice very close behind him say, "Thanks for not blowing the whistle on me back there."

Startled, David whirled and nearly collided with the guy. He was taller than David, his sun-bleached yellow hair worn shaggy; he had a hard broad chest and long arms and (David ascertained with a surreptitious glance) a pretty decent basket. "That's okay," David said.

"No, really; I appreciate it." The backpacker touched him, then, on the side of his neck of all places, and suddenly it was as though an electric shock went through David from top to bottom. He had to lean against the car door to keep from falling over. Concern showed in the blond youth's blue eyes. "Are you okay?" he'd said.

"I, yeah, sorry, I just — I'm fine." Fire was racing through his veins; his head had begun swimming; and he realized, to his mingled horror and delight, that he was in the middle of a lust attack more powerful than anything he'd experienced since that day at thirteen when he'd found his great-uncle's porn stash in the shed behind his *abuela*'s house.

"Well, okay then," the backpacker said, and with a wave and a brilliant smile had begun to turn away. And David, desperate to prolong their contact, said the first thing that had come into his head.

"Um, are you — are you on foot? I mean, do you need a ride anywhere?"

The youth turned back, another, more knowing and somehow more calculated smile replacing the first, and they locked eyes. "Well, now," the blond guy said. He gave David another appraising look. "That depends on what you have in mind. You have a place we could go?"

"Where I work," David blurted. "My boss is out till three. We could go there."

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"Sounds good to me," the blond guy replied. "You got any weed?" David shook his head. "Too bad," the backpacker said. "Still, I'm sure we could figure out some way to, you know, relax. Right, little David?"

"How — how do you know my name?"

"Earth to David! Duh! You, like, *told* me?" The guy had already begun to shift off his backpack and make his way around the car to the passenger side. David followed and opened the rear door for him. The guy stowed the backpack in the rear seat and closed the door on it. "If you don't mind," the youth said, "I'll take the suicide seat." And before David had a chance to object, the backpacker had opened the right front door and was swinging himself with athletic grace into the car.

Hurrying back to his side of the vehicle, David had joined him, and a moment later they peeled out of the parking lot of the grocery. "I've got to drop off some things at my grandma's house first," David managed to say through his brain-whirl.

"No problem," the blond guy said. Casually he laid a hand on David's thigh, and after that it had been all David could do to stay on the road. When they reached David's grandmother's house, David was relieved to see that her car was not in the driveway. "I'll just be a second," he said to the backpacker. David climbed onto the porch, unlocked the door, and went into the house. The sunroom was empty except for the ginger cat, Billy, who yawned at him. "Grandma?" David called, just to be on the safe side. There was no answer save the ticking of the old grandfather clock in the corner. The house smelled a little musty, *An old lady smell*, he thought.

Suddenly he couldn't wait to get out of there. Rushing into the kitchen, he flung the groceries down on the kitchen table, put the perishables into the refrigerator, left the other stuff on the counter, and hurried out, nearly falling over Billy in his haste. "God damn you, Billy, *move!*" he yelled, aiming a kick at the cat, *his* cat, the cat he loved, the cat who slept on his bed every night, the cat he'd found shivering and starving one cold November day under the porch and brought inside and given a home. Dimly he was aware that something was terribly wrong with him, but all he could do was pray, *Don't leave! Don't leave!* to the backpacker in the car. He let the door slam behind him.

Back in the automobile, the young man had lit a cigarette and was

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leaning back in the seat, blowing smoke rings. David coughed. He hated cigarette smoke. "What took you so long?" asked the youth.

A half an hour later they were making out on the couch in Roberta's office when the telephone rang.

"So who was that?" the backpacker asked after David hung up.

"One of Roberta's clients. He's renting the old Schmidt place up on Corazón."

"Yeah? Is he cute?"

"Only if you like old." David clambered back on the couch and put his head on the backpacker's naked hairless chest. The blond youth pushed him away.

"So what's his name?"

"What does it matter? Jesus." David's shoulder hurt where the young man had pushed him.

Then the backpacker reached out and clamped his fingers around David's jaw. His grip was impossibly strong; it was like having his jaw caught in a steel vise. David tried to cry out, but he could only manage a squeak. The blond youth grinned, showing very white teeth, and tightened his grip. He pushed his face just inches from David's and said, in a very calm, very controlled voice, "This is how it is, David. You are going to tell me the *name* under which this man travels. You are going to tell it to me *now*, of your own free will, as you let me into your car of your own free will, as you let me into this office of your own free will, as you let me fuck you of your own free will. You will not lie to me. If you lie, or refuse to tell me the renter's name, I will go to your *abuela*'s house and I will gut your grandma from her piehole to her wrinkled old gash. I may or may not rape her first, depending on how I feel at the time. Understand me?" The backpacker relaxed his grip just enough to permit David to nod.

"Now let's try this again. What name did the man give you? I'm letting go of your jaw now. Yell and I'll kill you." He let go of David's face.

*Oh God oh God*, David thought. *Oh God oh God.* All his grandmother's warnings had come back to him: Don't talk to strangers. Never bring a stranger to the house. Never pick up hitchhikers. David's jaw ached so badly he thought he was going to faint. But he managed to whisper, "Anderssen."

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"Louder, please," said the backpacker cheerfully. "I didn't *quite* hear you."

"Anderssen. He said his name was Mister Anderssen."

"First name?"

"I don't — no, wait! *Wait!*" For the young man's smile had vanished. Desperately David thought back to the rental document. He'd typed in a name. What had it been? *Mother of God help me remember please,* he thought. It had started with an R. "Ralph," he said. "No, not Ralph — Rafael. With an 'f,' not a 'ph.' Rafael Anderssen."

"Figures," snorted the blond youth. "Good boy, David. Good little monkey. Now one last bit of info and I'll be on my way and you'll forget everything that happened here today. Where can I find the Schmidt place?"

Before David could answer, the backpacker stiffened, his nostrils dilated (*Like a wolf's,* thought David, *like a wolf's*) and cast a quick look toward the front of the office. "Make it quick, little David, because unless I miss my guess, your boss's car is due to pull up in front of the shop in about sixty seconds. And I really don't think she'd appreciate learning you've been entertaining gentleman callers in her private office. Do you?"

David stammered out directions to Avenida Corazón. "It's a brown house at the very end of the lane. What — what are you going to do to him?" he added, panic in his voice, because the young man had leaped nimbly from the sofa and, more quickly than David could have thought possible, donned his clothing again.

"Nothing you need to concern yourself with, little David," he said, with another terrifying grin. Then he spoke a word. David was never able to remember afterward what word the blond youth had spoken, but it had been a terrible word, that much he remembered; it soiled the air as it came out of the backpacker's lips. The next thing David knew, Roberta Vigil's concerned face was peering down at him.

"David?" she was saying. "David, are you all right?"

"What?" David said. He felt groggy and his jaw ached terribly. He had somehow fallen off the couch and was lying on the floor. "I don't — what time is it?"

"Three-fifteen," said his boss. Her eyes traveled down his body, and

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he realized with a shock that he was still naked. "Oh, my God," Roberta Vigil said. Her hand flew to her mouth. "What *happened* to you, David?"

For running down the length of his torso, from the top of his smooth chest to the short hair of his pubic region, were five livid red clawmarks.

## 5.

THE TALL MAN had nearly reached the turnoff to Corazón when his cell phone rang. He glanced at the screen. It was the number for the real estate office. "Yes, Ms. Vigil?" he said.

"I'm so sorry to bother you, Mister Anderssen," came the woman's voice. She sounded upset. "But I — but I didn't know who else to call. I — my assistant, David, he — he's been attacked; there are awful scratches all over his body; I found him in my office without — without any clothes on and there was nobody here in La Llorona I could call, you understand? Because it's such a small town and people *talk* so, and — I'm so sorry, Mister Anderssen, I know this isn't your problem, but I wondered if possibly you might — "

"I'll be right over," said the gray-eyed man, and he braked, backed, made a U-turn, and drove back toward the village.

When he reached the office, Roberta Vigil was waiting outside. "Thank you. Thank you for coming," she said when he got out of the car. "He's in here. He's conscious; there's no blood, I mean there's blood in his wounds but he's not bleeding, his bleeding stopped, I guess. This way," she added, unnecessarily, and led him through the waiting room, past the espresso bar, and into her office. The young receptionist, David, was sitting up. He had put on trousers and a shirt, but the shirt was hanging open, and through the gap in the fabric the gray-eyed man could see his wounds.

But that was not what stopped him in his tracks. What made him halt halfway across the room, halt and cover his nostrils with his hand, was the stench. "Coyote," he said at once.

"What did you say?" The real estate agent regarded him anxiously.

"Nothing." He closed the distance between himself and the receptionist and knelt down beside him. "David? Can you hear me?" The boy

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was sitting, partially hunched, a look of desolation on his face, eyes slightly unfocused, staring into space. "He's in shock," said the man who called himself Anderssen. "You'd better call nine-one-one."

"I did already," said the woman, wringing her hands. "They said it would be an hour before they could get here; there's been a big accident on I-25 and all their crews are tied up."

"Fetch me a little water in a cup, would you, please?" She nodded and fled. Steeling himself, Anderssen reached out and took hold of David's left wrist. Immediately his mind was flooded with sensations so intense he nearly gasped aloud. Shaking his head to clear it, he took David's pulse. It was strong; a good sign. The tall man placed his mouth close to boy's ear and whispered into it one of the Words of healing. David's scream brought Roberta running.

"What's the matter? What happened?" she cried. David was sobbing now, clinging to Anderssen like a child. "Oh my God, David!"

"There, now," the gray-eyed man was saying. "There, now. Shh. Shh," as though David were a little boy whom he was comforting. Anderssen glanced at the real estate agent. "The water, please." She handed him the espresso cup. His hand received it from her and brought it close to the sobbing receptionist. But instead of bringing the cup to David's lips, so that he might sip some of the water from it, the gray-eyed man dipped a finger into the cup, touched his wet fingertip to the boy's forehead, and wrote something with water on the boy's skin.

Immediately David's body relaxed. His sobs died away, his tortured face relaxed, and in the next moment Roberta realized that her assistant had fallen sound asleep. "What — how did you do that?" she asked, in a voice of wonder.

"Just a little trick I picked up in Mumbai," said Anderssen. He sounded tired. Gently he disengaged David's arms from their clutch of him and, holding the back of his head with one hand, laid him back on the couch. "He'll be out until the ambulance gets here. But those scratches will need to be seen to. And in the weeks to come he should be checked for evidence of sexually transmitted disease." He rose to his feet.

"Sexually transmitted disease?" said Roberta faintly. "Do you mean that whoever did this — that he was raped?" Her hands had formed into tight fists; her knuckles were white.

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"In a manner of speaking," the gray-eyed man said. "I phoned for you earlier. Your assistant seemed very distracted, and I heard noises in the background. Whoever did this to him was here then." He knew he would have no trouble tracking the Coyote, now that he had the Coyote's scent. *Then again*, he thought bitterly, *why bother*? There was only one possible reason why the creature should appear here, in La Llorona of all places, so soon following the gray-eyed man's arrival.

The descendants of the Seven had sent it. He wondered how they had found him. Through the Stone, probably, or the White Mask. However they had done it, they were too late to stop him. He was nearly home at last.

Roberta Vigil had sat down next to David. The boy, fast asleep, did not stir, but he had put his thumb in his mouth, and he looked impossibly young, lying there. "I was raped once," she said.

"I'm sorry," he said.

"It was in college," she went on, in a tone almost conversational, staring at nothing. "This guy I'd met at a party. I used to party a lot in those days. You know, Catholic girl away from home for the first time, free at last, ha ha." She glanced over at him. "He slipped something into my drink. The doctors said later it was that date-rape drug. I didn't remember a thing about it, not a thing." She shook her head, remembering. "Poor David. Do you think he'll remember?"

"I doubt it," said the gray-eyed man. "But the mind not remembering doesn't actually help, does it? Because the body has a memory, too."

"Yes, it does." She looked at him again. "Who are you, really?" she asked. And then, without waiting for him to answer, she said, "I dreamed about you last night."

"Oh?" said the gray-eyed man.

"I dreamed we were standing on a hilltop together, overlooking the sea. Below us a city was burning; you could see the fires here and there, and plumes of thick black smoke. People were shouting and screaming; horses were neighing; there were soldiers dressed in old-time clothing, like something out of Monty Python. You were trying to tell me something, something very important. I don't remember what it was you said, only that it made me feel very sad. You were going away, I think. And so was I. But you said we'd meet again someday. That's all I remember." She cocked her head at him. "Do you believe in reincarnation?"

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"I'm afraid I do," he said.

"Me, too." She looked back down at the sleeping boy. "I think David was my son in a past life. Or my daughter. I always thought so, from the day he was born, the way he looked at me through the viewing window at the hospital. He's my sister's kid, you know. She was a cokehead, got pregnant, carried David to term like the good Catholic girl she was, then dumped him on her boyfriend's mama and ran off with some jerk." She smiled. "It happens a lot out here. We're on the direct drug route from Mexico."

"So David's your nephew," said the gray-eyed man.

She nodded. "Yes. I knew he was gay from the time he was nine years old. I don't know how I knew; I just did. His grandma would just die if she found out." She stood up suddenly. "She mustn't find out, Mister Anderssen."

"Call me Rafael. Please."

"Rafael. Like the angel?" When he did not answer, she laughed softly. "Raphael, Angel of Happy Meetings. I read that in a tract once."

"It's going to be all right, Ms. Vigil," the gray-eyed man said. "I promise."

"Call me Roberta," she said, and sat back down again.

They waited together until the ambulance came to take the Traitor away.

## 6.

WHEN HE GOT HOME that evening, the gray-eyed man looked for signs of the Coyote, but the creature was not in evidence, and it did not appear that night, or the next night, or the next night after that. *Lying low*, he thought. *Awaiting opportunity*, but he was not certain; perhaps it had taken his measure and decided against direct confrontation. He would have to be vigilant, but he refused to let the Coyote's presence — or lack of same — rule his thoughts. If it came back — when it came back — he would be ready for it.

In the meantime, there was the Door to consider.

It had to be in or around La Llorona. All signs pointed to that verity:

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the Rabbi was here, and the Enemy — the agent of the descendants of the Seven — was not far off. Now the task before him was to find the Lamp, who would show him the Way to the Door, and lead him to the Key that would open it. Then the Sacrifice would present itself, and the Door would open, and he would go through it, and be Home at last.

He laughed to himself. *I think archetypally now*, he thought. *In capital letters.* It was a sign that he needed to relax and trust the One. So he set out to explore La Llorona and vicinity like any summer tourist.

He went hiking in the mountains. He rented fishing equipment at the general store and played live catch-and-release with lazy trout from the Agua Azul. He went to church on Sunday mornings, sitting in the back of the little chapel, not taking communion with the others, just enjoying the sound and scents of the Mass, which the little priest from Glorieta said in Spanish and English. On Saturdays he roamed the stalls at the Three Village Farmers' Market, where vendors from La Llorona, Pecos, and Glorieta pooled resources to compete for tourist money. He always looked forward to market day: the bustle of it, the excitement of the children, the flushed faces of lovers, the mounds of goods. It reminded him of the old days in Firenze, after he had escaped the Seven and begun to make his own way in the strange new world into which they had brought him.

One Saturday he was cruising the stalls when he came upon a playpen full of squirming puppies. Beside it, at a folding table covered with a cloth, sat two women wearing stick-on name tags. On the table lay Xeroxed brochures, lapel pins, a looseleaf binder paged with photographs of happy, smiling dogs of various sizes, shapes, and ages. A sign on the table said, OPEN HEARTS SANCTUARY: A NO-KILL ANIMAL SHELTER. "Hello," said one of the women.

"Hello," he replied, with a smile; and he was about to move past them when a movement under the table caught the corner of his eye. Looking down, he saw a snout poking out from beneath the cloth. "And who is this?" he inquired.

The woman who had spoken laughed. "That's Dusty," she said. "Come on out, Dusty. Say hello to the gentleman." The tall man squatted and extended a hand, palm up. The snout, which was black and white, slowly emerged from its covering, revealing two bright black eyes behind

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it and pendulous, cocked ears. "Dusty's been with us forever," the woman said. "He's officially disabled, but you wouldn't know it; he gets around just fine. Still, people freak out when they see him."

"He looks fine to me." Dusty sniffed his hand, looked up at him, sniffed his hand again. A tail thumped somewhere out of sight.

"Oh. Well, hold on a sec. Come on out, Dusty. Show the man your whole self." She ducked behind the tablecloth. A moment later Dusty's head disappeared. When she emerged again, she had him on a short leather leash. Getting up, she led him around to the front of the table. He was a spaniel mix, the gray-eyed man guessed, black and white with black spots here and there, medium build but broad-shouldered; there was perhaps a touch of pit bull in his bloodline somewhere. His haunches and right foreleg were intact, but his left foreleg ended at the shoulder. "Hit by a car when he was a baby," the woman said cheerfully. She was plump, caftaned, with one gold tooth. "They had to amputate the leg. Nobody wants a three-legged dog, do they, sweetie?" She kissed the air over the dog's leg.

"How much?" asked the man who called himself Anderssen.

"Sorry?"

"How much do you want for the dog?" he asked patiently. He had taken out his wallet and was fingering some bills.

"One-fifty," said the other woman, who had not spoken before. She was gaunt, unsmiling, with dark hair. The plump woman cast her an irritated glance.

"Our standard adoption fee is seventy-five dollars," she said to the gray-eyed man. "Anything you can spare over that would be greatly appreciated. The Sanctuary depends entirely upon private donations for its operations, and all donations are tax deductible." There was something sorrowful in her tone.

He said, "I promise I'll bring him back to visit." He counted out the money. The plump woman gave him papers to sign — "We'll have to arrange for a home visit, to make sure your facility is a safe place for Dusty" — and she agreed to rendezvous with him the following Thursday at the house on Corazón. Then the gray-eyed man knelt down in the dust of the Market and placed his hand on the three-legged dog's head. A moment later he withdrew his hand. Dusty's tail was wagging fiercely.

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"Till Thursday, then," he said to the plump woman, nodded at the dark-haired one, and walked off with his heart lighter than it had felt in weeks.

For he had found the Lamp. He was as certain of that fact as he was certain that the Coyote had been shadowing him, just out of sight, for the previous week and a half. He had found the Lamp, and somehow, in some way, Dusty would show him the Way to the Door. All he had to do was wait and watch, and prepare himself for the attack that would surely come.

## 7.

HE TOOK DUSTY everywhere with him after that. The dog proved nimble, despite his three legs, moving with a kind of skipping hop that required no assistance to gain the car's back seat or his sofa's cushions. They explored the hills above La Llorona, sniffed mountain lion spoor, watched golden eagles nesting on the ridge. Once they surprised a mother bear with her cubs, and the gray-eyed man grimly readied a fierce Word, for he knew how dangerous such encounters could become. But he did not need to use the Word after all. Dusty, one twelfth the bear's size, faced her down snarling; and she turned tail, her cubs bouncing after her through the tufts of bunch grass.

One day he and the dog drove to the site of the old La Llorona spa. It was in the process of being restored by the County Parks Commission, said the uniformed attendant at the makeshift gate, "but you're welcome to go in and look around as long as you mind your step. You gotta leash the pooch, though," the man added, eyeing Dusty dubiously. Dusty eyed him dubiously back. Smiling, the gray-eyed man clipped the leash onto Dusty's collar, and together they walked through the chainlink gate.

The old woman he thought of as the Rabbi had told him that the spa had been torn down during the 1940s, but everywhere he could see the signs of the former complex: foundation stones, half-shattered pathways, piles of mortared rubble. They came upon the remnants of a large covered well, surrounded by bright orange plastic mesh stiffened with rebar and hung with a DANGER sign. Behind it ran the remains of a wall, and beyond that, a stony field littered with beer cans and old whiskey bottles. In the

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distance, an arm of the Agua Azul winked blue in the sunshine. "This was a courtyard back in the day," said a man's voice behind them. "Folks used to draw water from that well; drink it for what ailed them."

The tall man turned. The speaker emerged from the shadow of a huge old cottonwood where he had been sitting on a makeshift bench. He was Anglo, in his late sixties, the gray-eyed man guessed, with a round, open, friendly face. On his head he wore a wide-brimmed cloth hat with a neck-apron attached to the back of it. There was an opened thermos on the bench, and he was munching a half-eaten sandwich. Dusty's tail waved.

The old man stuck out a thick-fingered right hand. "Lloyd Thrush," he said. "Santa Fe Community College."

"Rafael Anderssen," said the gray-eyed man. Their hands touched, gripped. At once, a flood of imagery: a blonde woman, laughing; rain pouring through steaming jungle; gunfire spattering; the whistle-boom of mortar fire; a military funeral cortege. Their hands parted.

"Good God Almighty," Lloyd Thrush said. "What in hell just happened?"

"It's the lack of humidity out here, I expect," said the gray-eyed man easily. "Static charges out the wazoo." He had been studying the locals' English, learning idiom. "What brings you to the spa, Mister Thrush?"

The old man was still staring at the hand that the gray-eyed man had touched. "I'm an archaeologist," he said. He squinted up at the gray-eyed man. "State law requires any restoration of historic sites to be vetted by one of my stripe, and I drew the short straw. We are much loathed by construction crews, let me tell you. And you, sir? Nice dog."

"Thanks," said the gray-eyed man. They contemplated Dusty in silence. Dusty sat back on his haunches, tail still wagging, and contemplated them in return, looking first at one, then the other. The tall man said, "Tell me, Mister Thrush. Where do you think Eusebio Varela saw his vision of La Llorona? It had to be around here somewhere."

The old man grunted, turned, waved in the direction of the Azul. "That's the ten thousand dollar question," he said. "I'm *assuming* it was along there, where the watercourse bends in from the west. Used to be a cart-track through that way; brought grain from the Varela hacienda to the mill and back again."

"There was a mill here?"

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The archaeologist looked surprised. "Well, sure. They tore it down to make room for the spa."

"I wouldn't have thought the Azul was deep and swift enough to power a waterwheel," said the gray-eyed man.

"It wasn't, originally. They dug out the bed upstream about a mile, graded it all along here, narrowed it, shored up the sides. You can see the original stonework. Used hand-tools, of course, and slave labor. Back in the 1830s, that was."

"Slaves?"

"Yes, sir," said the old man. "New Mexico had slaves, all right. Say, you never answered my question."

"Which was?"

"What's your interest in this old place?" He gave the gray-eyed man a shrewd look. "You wouldn't by any chance be interested in investing in a public works project, would you?"

The tall man laughed. "I just like old places," he said. "Mind if you show me that old cart-track?"

"Ah," said the archaeologist. He took another bite of his sandwich, chewed, swallowed. "A vision seeker."

"Pardon?"

"We get 'em every month or so. Folks who read about the wailing ghost in some New Age magazine, come up here looking for God or whatever." He shrugged. "Whatever floats your boat." He took all but the final bite of his sandwich, bent down, offered the remnants to Dusty, who sniffed them delicately, then glanced up at the gray-eyed man for permission to proceed.

"Go ahead, boy," said the gray-eyed man. Dusty wagged his tail and ate the last of the archaeologist's sandwich.

"Polite dog," said the old man. "Come on if you're coming." And he turned and picked his way across the ruined courtyard, the gray-eyed man and the three-legged dog following close behind.

At first the gray-eyed man could see no difference between the trash-littered field and the track the old man insisted they were following. Then his eyes began to pick out regularities in the red earth. "Wagon-wheel ruts," the old man said. "See? There, and there, and there." Suddenly he bent down, picked something out of the dirt, wiped it on his pants, held

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it up for the gray-eyed man to inspect. "Well, what do you know," he said. He sounded surprised. "You're good luck, Mister. I've been along this track a hundred times and never found anything like this before. Know what this is?" The object in his hand was roughly circular, about two inches across, fashioned of some kind of metal, heavily tarnished. There were marks stamped into its face.

"Haven't a clue," said the gray-eyed man.

"It's a slave I.D.," said the archaeologist. "Certain slaves, ones the owners trusted, would get sent out on business, or loaned out now and again to slave owners' friends. They made 'em wear badges, stamped with their name and the name of their owner, so folks wouldn't think they were runaways and steal 'em or lynch 'em. Can't read this one; have to clean it up first. But it belonged to some poor sap, right enough." He proffered the badge. The tall man took it from him gingerly, then relaxed. The object was dead, the spirit of the man or woman it had marked long departed. He handed it back and gestured toward the Azul.

"Can we go over there?"

"If you want," the old man said. He pocketed the slave badge. They proceeded in silence. Dusty moved cautiously, navigating the broken glass. They came to a large patch of blackened earth. "Kids," said the archaeologist sourly. "They come out here, light fires, have themselves a party, never mind the drought and the fire danger. That's why we finally had to put chainlink around this whole area, hire a watchman. Not much else to do up here when you're a kid, I guess."

"I guess," said the gray-eyed man, and that was when he smelled the Coyote.

It was standing under some Chinese elms at the bank of the Azul on the other side of the field, watching them. He saw at once that it was young, and that it was not alone: there were two others with it, lying half-hidden in the tall grass. They all looked human. The tall man wondered if this was the same creature who had seduced the real estate woman's assistant, and he decided from the smell that it probably was. Dusty stopped in his tracks, hackles raised, and began to growl. "What's the matter, boy?" said the archaeologist, curious. Then he spotted the figures on the bank, and began to shout. "Hey! You kids! Get out of there! This is private property!"

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He started forward. The tall man reached out and gripped the old man's shoulder, halting him. "Wait," the gray-eyed man said.

"The hell I will. God *damn* these kids," the archaeologist said, and tried to pull from the gray-eyed man's grasp. "Hey! Let go of me!"

The tall man spoke the Word of entrancement. The old man stopped struggling and just stood there, face slack, mouth slightly open. "Sorry, Lloyd," said the gray-eyed man. "But you wouldn't have stood a chance." Dusty continued to growl, his eyes never leaving the figures on the streambank. Quickly the gray-eyed man walked around the archaeologist, drawing a circle with his foot in the dust of the field. When he had closed the circle, he spoke a second Word, one of warding, and though he could not see it, he could feel the protective barrier spring up around the old man. Then he reached down, unclipped the dog's collar from his leash, cast the leash aside into the field, spoke the Word that would initiate Dusty's change, and together they leaped forward, toward the watching creatures.

The moment the Coyotes saw them move, the two on the ground leaped up, and the three fanned out, getting ready, changing as they went. The young one dropped to his hands and knees, sprouted ears, tail, lupine muzzle. One of the other two, a big man, grew taller, wider, broader, ursine. The last was the gaunt dark-haired woman from the Pet Sanctuary table. She shook, writhing, in the weeds, then reared up, cobralike. Then they, too, rushed forward, growling and snarling and hissing, feral, joyful, murderous.

They did not get far. For Dusty grew: taller and taller, hair sloughing off him, scales gleaming beneath his corroding fur, whippet tail thickening, lengthening, slashing the air, narrow jaws broadening, filling up with teeth as sharp as razors and as long as a man's hand. Bounding forward on two strong hind legs, he reached the Coyotes first, and with a roar snapped up the snake thing, shook it, broke its spine, tossed it aside and went for the others. The wolf-creature, slavering in terror, dived for Dusty's leg.

The tall man faced the were-bear. It rose up before him, grandfather of all Kodiaks, mighty-shouldered, claws murderous. "Foolish child," said the man who called himself Anderssen. "Where wert thou when He laid the foundations of the Earth?" And spoke the Word.

It was not the Terrible Word, the Word of unmaking. That Word he had never permitted himself to speak, no matter the danger to himself or

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to those who had helped him down through the centuries, no matter how great the temptation to do good with it. For he had seen what the saying of that Word could do, and he had vowed, on the burning plain, never again to utter it, duty to the One or no duty. And for that rebellion the One had permitted him to be sucked into flesh, trapped in spacetime by the Seven seekers of power beneath the vaults of Rome; condemned him to centuries of wandering through mortal lands, experiencing firsthand the virtues of the small. And every century or so the One would come to him, in dream or vision, and say, "Wilt thou speak it now?", and each time he would shake his borrowed mortal's head and say, "I will not."

And so he did not speak it now. But the Word he did speak, though not the most terrible, was terrible enough; and the bear-thing screamed its despair. At the same moment, Dusty gave a roar, and a voice half-wolf, half-man shrieked agony. Something large and heavy flumped to the red earth. Before him, the bear-thing tottered, wavered, crashed like an oak-tree, and lay still.

He rose from his half-crouch. Dusty's form was already beginning to dwindle, and in a moment the dog bounded up to him on his three legs, panting happily. They examined the corpses together. The were-bear had reverted to the form of the big man, his thick neck broken, blood on his goateed, earringed face. The one who had been the wolf-thing lay twisted, broad-chested, blond-haired, eyes open, staring in horror. But when the gray-eyed man bent over the body of the once-serpent, he saw her thin chest's rapid rise and fall.

He knelt beside her. Her back was broken; her limbs frozen. *Paralyzed*, he thought, but not so paralyzed that she could not breathe, and, breathing, suffer. He said, "What wouldst thou have me do, child?"

"Go to Hell," she whispered.

"I have been in Hell these past five hundred years," he replied, "for Earth is Hell, and always was," and then he spoke the Word of mercy, and the hate faded from her eyes.

Dusty whined, pawed her corpse, looked up at him. "I know," said the gray-eyed man. "Come on, boy. We've got some cleaning up to do."

The two males he carried to the burned place in the field, and spoke the Word that turned their bodies to ash. He had touched them, scanning, and determined they were foreign to this place; their supernal cremation

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did not take as long as it would have by conventional means, and he made sure that their bodies were entirely consumed, including the teeth and smallest bits of bone. But the woman was a local, so he left her body where it had fallen, and he and Dusty walked back to the spot where they had left the entranced archaeologist. He still stood, slack-jawed, weaving slightly, knees trembling with their long exertion. The tall man spoke the Word of release, and caught the old man as he fell.

"What happened?" he asked. "I must have fainted. Those kids — "

"Dusty and I ran them off," the gray-eyed man said to him. "But we found something else. Brace yourself." He led him to the gaunt woman's body. Remnants of her blouse and slacks still clung to her.

"Holy Mother of God." The old man went down on one knee. "Any idea who she was?"

"I saw her at the Farmer's Market," said the gray-eyed man. "She volunteers for the Pet Sanctuary. I bought Dusty here from her partner."

"Those damn kids." The old man's voice was shaking. The man who called himself Anderssen helped him to rise. "Do you have a cell phone? I hate the damn things. But we can't just leave her here. And those boys are still out there somewhere."

"I've already called the police. They're on their way."

"A hell of a note," said the archaeologist. He put a hand over his eyes, rubbed his temples. "You never get used to it, you know."

"Used to what, Lloyd?"

"Used to death," the old man said. He looked at the gray-eyed man, bleary-eyed. "I served in Vietnam. Saw a lot of my friends fragged. Got high a lot, just to stay sane enough to go out the next day and kill more gooks." He shook his head. "You see friends die, yet you come out of it all still alive and kicking, and you feel, 'Jeez! Death ain't never gonna get me,' but you know, deep down, that one day your time will come; your luck will run out; that door'll rise up before you and you'll have no choice but to walk right through it into the dark. Death's always gonna win in the end. There's no escaping it, ever." He laughed suddenly. "Maybe that's why I like old things, digging 'em up. Makes me feel a connection, like there's continuity, despite all Death can do. Ah, shit. I'm babbling."

But the gray-eyed man was staring at him. *The Lamp shows the Way to the Door*, he thought. *And the Sacrifice opens the Door that the Key*

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*may be employed.* The Key, which could be anything: a person, a process, or a thing. He recalled how Dusty had sat back on his haunches in the ruined courtyard, looked at him, then at the old man, then back at him again. Showing the Way. *He is the Way*, the man who called himself Anderssen thought. *And she was the Sacrifice. She! The Coyote!* "Say that again," he pleaded.

"Say what again?" demanded the old man. "Say, boy, you're trembling." For he was.

"About the door," said the gray-eyed man. "Death as the Door."

"You're in shock, bud," said the archaeologist gently. He put a thick hand on the gray-eyed man's arm. "Come on. Let's get back to the compound. The cops'll be here pretty soon, I guess. She'll keep," he added, with a glance at the gaunt-bodied dead woman, "for a while longer."

## 8.

WHEN HE RETURNED to his house many hours later, Roberta Vigil was waiting for him. She got out of the car as he pulled up. He parked, turned off the motor, sat there while she walked over. She was nervous, clutching her handbag, and he noticed her makeup was slightly smudged, as though she had been weeping. *La Llorona*, he thought. "Hello," he said to her. Dusty, curled up next to him, wagged a sleepy tail.

"I heard," she said. "About what happened, over at the spa site." At his look of surprise she gave a wan smile. "Small town, you know? My God, what's this world coming to?" She did not wait for him to answer. "Are you all right?"

"I'm pretty tired, Roberta," he said.

"I won't stay long," she said. "I just came over to check on you, and — and to tell you about David."

"How is David?" the gray-eyed man asked. The last he had heard, the agent's assistant had made a full recovery and was back on the job, shaken but none the worse for wear.

"His AIDS test came back negative," she said. "Thank God. And he remembered something, something to do with you. He said the — man who, who he'd — been with, the man had asked about you. Threatened to

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hurt his *abuela* if he didn't tell him where you lived. He wanted — he wanted to warn you to watch out for yourself."

"Tell him 'thank you,'" said the gray-eyed man. "And that that danger has now passed."

"How do you know?" asked the woman anxiously.

"I met with the young man in question," he replied, "and we came to an understanding. He's long gone, and he won't be back. Tell David that."

"All right, I will." She hesitated, as though she were going to say something more; then she smiled and turned and got back into her car and drove away quickly.

He followed the dog into the house. He went into the room he used for his study and took out the box he had hidden there. Drawing forth the object nestled within, he brought it into the full light of the kitchen and laid it out on the table. It was a scrap of parchment, half-encased in red wax, very old. There was writing inside it; the parchment had worn so thin you could see the black traceries through the vellum, curling away in reverse. He looked down at the Terrible Word and thought, *Death is the Door. Yet I cannot die.*

They had tried to kill him many times. They had tried stoning him, drowning him, beating him bloody. They had tried drawing and quartering him. In Wien they had dragged him behind a horse over broken glass, then poured kerosene over his body and set him alight. No sooner had the stones struck, the waters closed over him, the hammerings buffeted him, the ropes pulled at his limbs, the flames licked his screaming skin, than the stones had flown back into their casters' faces, the waters had carried him far from harm, his attackers' blows had turned upon themselves, the ropes snapped, the flames snuffed themselves. They had tried poison, too: in Milano, Marseilles, Praha. But poison affected his body no more than alcohol or marijuana affected his mind. He was like Baldur, whom all things in Heaven and Earth had sworn never to harm, save that unlike Baldur, he had no mistletoe to fear, despite the best efforts of all the Lokis down the centuries whom the Seven and their descendants had sent in pursuit of him.

And now, at last, he understood. To be freed from space and time, he must seek that which had ever been denied him: Death, the Door through which all mortal kind must pass. Yet to him, who was no mortal, Death

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would never come, though the world spin from its orbit, though the seas boil away in thermonuclear joy, though mountain ranges rise and fall and the moon fall from the sky. That had been the curse of the One: that he would live among mortals, know them, learn to love them, ever watch them die while yet he lived *unless thou speakst the Terrible Word as We have bid. For thou wert fashioned from Our wrath, and Our wrath is thy purpose, and only in thy purpose wilt thou find a true and lasting joy. And We would have thee joyful, child, for We are not Justice only, but also Love.*

The Angel of Death looked down at the Terrible Word. He had had the Key all along, and it was the one Key he had sworn never to use against any world ever again, no matter how just that world's demise might be, how fair the sentence of death passed by the One against its vile citizenry. And was it due to the depth of his soul's commitment, or to the limited creative imagination the theologians claimed angels possessed, that he had never once, in all those centuries, considered using it against himself?

At his feet, his dog whimpered softly. The man who called himself Anderssen smiled, placed the parchment back in its box, closed the box, and put it back in its hiding place. Then he stretched, picked up Dusty, carried him to the couch, and sat stroking him as they watched the sun go down. *Somewhere out there,* he thought, *La Llorona walks the roads, wailing her death-song. And someday, perhaps, when these fragile creatures have lived and loved and died their last, when I am alone on a sterile ball of mud, perhaps then I will tire and relent.* "But not today," he said. He kissed his dog on the snout. "Not today."

They lay on the couch together until the darkness swallowed them.

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# CURIOSITIES

## *RETURN TO THE FUTURE*, BY DIAMANDIS FLORAKIS (1973)

31,450,670. No, that's not a mistranslated title to Alfred Bester's famous story, "5,271,009." It's the actual name of the protagonist of the debut novel by a talented Greek sf author who is, sadly, little-known in Anglophone territories. Diamandis Florakis, still with us today, produced ten novels in his "Decalogy of Eschatological Utopia," or, to employ his other series designation, "Ten Romances of Existential Anarchy." (My thanks to friend and editor Angelos Mastorakis for help with this research.) If subsequent volumes rival the first, it's a monumental accomplishment.

Our numerically named hero (colonized planets, days of the week, and regions of the globe are all designated with equal blandness) lives in "computer generation 2,354," an era thousands of years removed from ours. Thanks to the discovery of the nexus of evil in the human brain in generation 1,355 and the perfection of an operation for its removal, a "utopia of ethical and material paradise" now reigns — at least so believes the High Quotient, the leader of the human race. But if so, why are suicides exponentially increasing, as the populace's "feeling 1" ratings plummet?

When 31,450,670 discovers that his operation was faulty and that he possesses all the old vices — including murderousness — a battle ensues for the soul of humanity.

With a definite Age of Aquarius vibe, the novel still remains timely, pondering such eternal conundrums as this: "Murdering, they spoke of peace; in envisioning peace, they warred." Stylistically reminiscent of Zamiatin, Lem, Bunch, and van Vogt, the book reads like the libretto for the next great rock opera by the Flaming Lips.

—Paul Di Filippo

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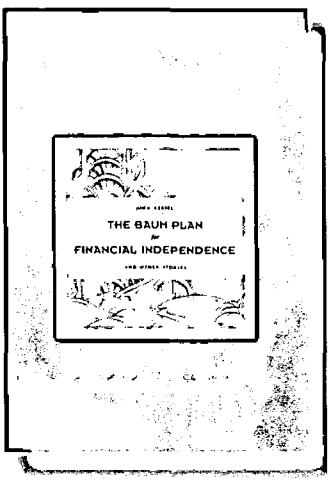


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